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N13
Parke

"Marjie was speeding rapidly across the prairie."

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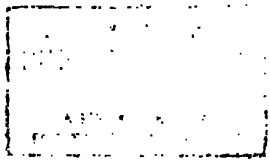

"Marjie was speeding rapidly across the prairie."

MARJIE

of the

Lower Ranch

BY

FRANCES PARKER

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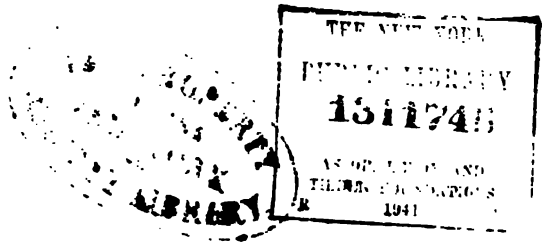
1903.



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To
My Best Friend,
My Father

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Marjie of the Lower Ranch.

CHAPTER I.

THE RETREAT OF THE HUNTED.

A MAJORITY of the people in that part of the country were familiar with its geography and recent history. Anyone within a radius of a hundred miles could have told the exact location of George Howell's ranch, and could have named the little creek which sprang from the mountains above and dashed madly past the cabin and sheds until it reached the Big River. They could have told, to a head, the number of sheep that were driven each spring to the summer range far to the north. As for the family history, they could have told that, too, —

more than one would care to hear; more, perhaps, than was strictly true.

But these settlers, isolated to a degree, must talk, even though the Howells were the best-to-do-people in the country. It not only gave them much satisfaction, but served to occupy in an agreeable manner many otherwise idle hours which at times were tedious commonplaces.

If any one had told them that they knew absolutely nothing of the lawlessness and secret doings continually going on in that neighborhood, their curiosity would have prompted them to investigate; but the probabilities are they would have found nothing, for was not the Howell ranch the last one on that side of the mountains? One mile farther up, at the mouth of a timbered gulch, stood an old deserted cabin, which years ago had been used by the soldiers of a now abandoned post as part of a cantonment. The most careful eye could have discerned nothing suspicious about the old building. It was long past the stage where a human being could live in it

with any degree of comfort. Their search would have ended there, so it is well for their peace of mind that no suspicious thought was entertained. It is well, also, for this story, which otherwise could never have been written, that they did not discover a narrow trail that circled the cabin, led a short distance through the timber, and then in a winding way up the precipitous side of the gulch, down into another gulch, not timbered as the first, but covered with a thick undergrowth of brush. The narrow, plainly marked path skirted, crossed, and recrossed the brush and a tiny stream for nearly two miles, leading upward in a roundabout way until it reached the narrow entrance of a charming little retreat which Nature seemingly had designed to be as secluded and hidden as it was picturesque and beautiful.

It was a deep depression, only a few rods wide, lying directly below a rounding ridge, and stretching some distance parallel with it. A lofty embankment enclosed this miniature valley, except for

a small opening on the east, through which flowed a clear running stream of cold spring water. Lashing the rocky ridge with foam, it flowed on through the opening, and, in an ever-diminishing stream, down the gulch below.

This bit of basin was carpeted with grass, while on one side a dense clump of willow and choke-cherry bushes screened from observation a rude log hut. A sharp eye could have detected signs of habitation upon entering the valley, but the ordinary, unsuspicious individual would have taken in the sweet, fresh beauty of the scene with a single glance, perhaps wandered a short distance up the stream, and then congratulating himself upon being the first white man to set foot upon so noticeable a spot, would depart. The clump of bushes would have no attraction for him, for bushes are common things.

But no one came and no one discovered. It seemed that years might pass before a stranger would set foot on that secluded spot. There were other

retreats, but none like this. So thought a man, who one day in early summer made his way through the bushes and stood upon the bank of the stream, intently watching the water as it hurled and sprayed itself against the rocky wall. So he had thought ten years before, when driven by despair and several armed men, he had by some strange chance wandered through the narrow entrance of this retreat and found that he was free.

Free, but dead to every one that he had ever known or loved! Dead to the world, — yet hunted. An outcast? Worse — an outlaw!

Yet it is good to live! To feel the soft breeze fan one's fevered brow, — to take deep draughts of that cold, life-giving water, — to lie in the shade of the bushes and sleep until the exhausted body recovers its strength — all this is good, even if one is an *outlaw*.

An outlaw's retreat! This was such a place. It matters little whether the man was guilty or not; he was an outlaw and this was his hiding-place, the like of

which one never sees, but reads about occasionally and then straightway disbelieves.

The bright glare of the morning's sun shone upon this man's uncovered head as he stood deep in meditation beside the stream. His thoughts rapidly reviewed his life since the morning that he awakened to find the warm sun shining upon him in the shelter of this retreat, until the present day. He summed up the good, the bad, the indifferent, and asked himself if, after all, life was worth living. — The warm air, the swish of water, the sweet scent of moist grass brought upon him a feeling of languor; his body asserted itself; — yes, it was good to live!

"Say, Ike," said a voice at his side, "I guess if you ain't got any objection, I'll go down below and take a look around the premises." The man, awakened from his reverie, turned quickly about and faced the intruder, — a mere lad.

"Go, if you want to. There's nothing to keep you here. Perhaps you will

get some news from the boys. They ought to have been back last week. — I'll bet they're up to some more devil-try!"

He mused for a moment and the boy moved away. "And, see here, Jerry, don't be in such a rush. Get a newspaper, if you can, and anything else in the reading line that they may happen to have."

The boy smiled broadly. "Don't worry about news! If I can't get a paper, Lil'll give me more news than I'll be able to pack back with me. She's a regular livin' newspaper! Folks don't need to subscribe for no paper 'round where she is!"

"That is true enough, poor woman," said the man, turning once more to the whirling water; "but she has the virtue of being good-hearted, and that atones for much."

"Even for her size?" queried the boy, as he laid himself down, full-length, upon the ground and drank from the stream.

"Don't joke! She can't help that. We must not forget that she has befriended us more than once and may again, — though Heaven help a man in so wretched, so helpless a condition!"

The boy muttered something about not meaning anything, regained his feet, and walked rapidly through the clump of bushes, returning soon with a little gray pony. He passed the silent man, then a half-ashamed expression crossed his boyish face. He turned back and stood near him, nervously scraping some loose-growing moss with the heel of his boot.

"You won't get lonesome, will you, Ike?" he said at last, flushing slightly at the question. A certain quality of respect and affection sounded in his voice as he spoke to the older man, which was instantly detected by him, for he turned around and placed both hands upon the boy's shoulders, and from his greater height smiled down at him.

It was wonderful how a smile transformed that dark face which a moment

"And from his greater height smiled down at him."

before was almost ugly in its stern moodiness.

"Lonesome? Not a bit of it! Go, and have a good time; only be careful! But I think I can trust you, Jerry. If you see any of the boys, and they're feeling anyway gay, don't let them draw *you* into anything. Understand? If *you* should get into trouble, — if anything should happen to you, I would indeed be lonesome." His face looked serious. "Now go, and good luck to you!"

"Don't you worry, Ike! I ain't got no friend on earth but you. I reckon I ain't going to do anything to get separated from you. But if I did, there ain't a jail in the country that would hold me!" The boy tossed his head defiantly. There was no trace of cowardice in him.

"I don't want you ever to be obliged to test the strength of those institutions. Why, you are free, Jerry! As free as the air! You can go into the world and be a man any time you wish; and perhaps there will come a time when you will want to. I hope so. Now, don't

get reckless, and do something that you will be sorry for all the rest of your life. Let the other fellow do it if he must, but you keep out of it. You're not wanted now, — there isn't a brand on you! Think what it means! A hunted, sneaking coyote is less pitiable, for it, at least, has never known what it means to be a man, — a respected — bah! Run along. It's getting late, and you won't have any day at all."

Jerry fumbled nervously with the stirrup, and when he finally looked up to say good-by the man had disappeared in the bushes.

CHAPTER II.

THE BOY JERRY.

THE boy led the pony as far as the pass in the rocky embankment, then he mounted, and with cautious swiftness the small, gray creature took its way down the gulch, and sometime later emerged from the wood-road in plain sight of George Howell's ranch.

The odor of cooking dinner came to the boy before he reached the house, and made him ravenously hungry. He threw the bridle reins to the ground and walked briskly up to the kitchen, the door of which was open. A woman, too ponderous to be called fat, stood over the cook-stove, her grimy, masculine face somewhat reddened by the heat. She nodded her towsly head at the boy.

"Hello, Jerry; I thought I saw you a-comin' up the road."

"Down the road," corrected the boy.

"Well, you was up the road when I see you! Anyway, you're just in time for dinner. Run down to the barn and tell George it's ready. The last of the sheep left yesterday, an' he's the only man on the place. It's kind of lonesome around here now. I was just wishin' some of you'd come along to kind of 'liven things up. Ain't got any news, have you? Jim Barnes was up yesterday from Tom's place; he's workin' there now. He says the wolves are thicker'n ever this spring. Got into the corral down there and killed four of Tom's calves. The children have been sick, too. That's the worst of havin' children; — always ailing. Mine are all out of their misery, poor things! Tom's man says they're better now, but Kitty's most played out at takin' care of them. I've just been thinkin' that it's a good thing for her that Marjie's come. She's had all the schoolin' that anyone needs,

for she must be eighteen or nineteen years old now. I tell you, *I* never went to school that long, and I don't see no need of it! She's been livin' with her aunt in California ever since she's a little bit of a thing. Her aunt's dead now, so she ain't got anyone left but her sister Kitty, so she's come out to live with her. George told me that her aunt left all her money to her, but I don't reckon it'll do her much good if she's goin' to live out here. There's a lot more," — stopping to take breath, "but run along, we'll finish our talk at the table. Tell George to hurry along for I'm going to dish dinner right up."

The "talk" had been somewhat one-sided. For Jerry's part, he kept up a bright smile which gradually broadened, until seeing a chance to escape, and too hungry to run the risk of having dinner postponed, he caught his pony and hurried down to the stable.

George Howell was a large, finely proportioned man with a strikingly good-looking face, which caused people to wonder why he married so ungainly a woman.

They were decidedly an ill-assorted couple. But the woman had always been contented, and the man, — he had a weakness for amassing money, the glitter of which had attracted him in the choice of a wife, who brought with her enough to start him nicely in the sheep business. It kept his mind diverted from her, too, — the most of the time.

They had been married many years, but he was only now in the prime of his life. The woman had never been young. At any rate, no one remembered to have seen her look any different, and one would have to possess a very plastic imagination to think of her as cuddled in an infant's swaddling clothes.

The plain dinner at the ranch that day seemed like a feast to Jerry, but before he had thoroughly satisfied his hunger to his own satisfaction there came an interruption, when three horseback riders dismounted at the door and tramped into the house with the freedom of frequent visitors. Without formalities, the woman set some places at the table for

them and they immediately made themselves at home.

"Well, Jerry, how's His Royal Highness?" inquired a dark-looking man whom the others called Kid, and who, from his forwardness, seemed to be the natural leader of the trio.

"His Highness 's all right," replied the boy shortly, "or, at least, he was when I left him this morning. He's been wonderin' why you fellers haven't come back before this. He was afraid mebbe you'd got into some kind of a scrape or another. I told him I reckoned you uns knew how to look out for your hides."

"Much obliged to him for his thoughtfulness," observed the dark one, as he leaned over and speared a piece of bread with his fork, "but he don't need to worry his moody old head about us, — hey, boys? No harm to His Highness, Jerry, you don't need to get mad about it! He's all right enough, but he's too all-fired good to travel with us, — except when it comes to *cards*. He beats the devil's own at that!"

"Let's have a game," suggested George Howell. "There won't be anyone along here to-day, and you fellows are not in any particular rush. Jerry, here, he don't care to play anyway except seven-up, and that's a little too slow for us to-day. You can talk to Lil and keep her company while the rest of us try our luck."

"That'll suit me to a T, for I'm mighty fond of listenin', and I ain't got much money to lose nohow," said the boy as he moved away from the table.

"Don't you play no more'n five cent ante, George Howell, unless you have better luck than you had last time," admonished the woman. The man's reply was a loud laugh, but she, unnoticing, went on,— "and here, you, Jerry, run along and get me a pail of water while you're standin' around doing nothin'!"

While the boy helped the woman in the kitchen, and with good-natured patience listened to her steady stream of talk, the four men sat quietly around a small table in an adjoining room, intent upon a game of chance.

Sometime later the woman, from out of doors, rested her arms upon the window-sill and silently watched the men as they played. Finally, to attract their attention, she coughed. Howell put his cards down upon the table and turned to her impatiently.

"Well?"

"Oh, nothin' much, only I just thought I'd let you know that Tom's a-comin' up the road, and he's bringing the girl, Marjie, along with him. I didn't know but some of you that's been sitting there so long might want to move about a little, and take the kinks out of you before she gets here." The woman laughed harshly. "I thought that 'u'd wake you fellers up! They're just comin' in at the gate."

With that last bit of information, George Howell rose hurriedly to his feet.

"Tom! At the gate? Here, boys, gather up these cards and take care of this money! And, Lil, you'd better come in the house and straighten things up a little."

"Mighty afraid your brother'll catch you gambling, ain't you?" said the woman, without moving from her position in the window. She was too large to move with ease, yet just now she seemed inclined to remain there indefinitely. A contemptuous expression came over her coarse face as she went on: — "Or is it the girl you're scared of? You're too mighty particular to live, George! But you ain't so terrible particular when none of your own folks are around. Guess you have an idea they're better than the majority of people. Umph?"

"Well, perhaps I have," he replied, as he hurriedly placed the table and chairs back into position, "and perhaps they are. Tom's wife is different from most of the woman out here, and I guess this little sister must be something like her. I don't want to make him ashamed of his relations, Lil."

This last was too much. Even she had a pride, — of a certain sort, — and just now it was touched.

"Ashamed! Do you hear that, boys? Ashamed! Ha, ha! He'll be a-wearin' a stand-up collar next, and he'll be wantin' me to deck myself out in high-heeled slippers and velvet dresses, with my hair all frizzed!" Her great body shook and trembled. The rage in her heart evaporated in the enjoyment of her witticism. Her husband quickly left the room, and the men suppressed their laughter, as she moved slowly along the side of the house to the door of the kitchen.

George Howell met his visitors as they drew their horses up to the hitching-posts in front of the long, flat ranch-house. His wife peered cautiously from the small kitchen window, her great sides still shaking with silent laughter. She drew back into the room, making a pretence of busying herself with some work, as the girl walked up to the open door. The woman's mirth instantly subsided. She was surprised into her best manners, which she never afterward wholly forgot in the presence of this same girl, who, hesitating for an instant

in the doorway, looked with uncertainty about the dimly lighted room, which in comparison with the brilliant sunlight outside appeared almost dark, and then with quiet ease walked up to the woman and extended her hand.

CHAPTER III.

MARJIE.

"YOU are Mrs. Howell, are you not? Your husband said that I would find you here. I am Margaret Navarre."

The woman took the girl's hand awkwardly, then dropped it as though it hurt her. She was unused to such civilities, but she pushed a chair toward her guest, saying, —

"Yes, you're Kitty's sister all right. I'd have known that from the looks of you, though you don't look anything like her. It must be your ways, for you're bigger and your eyes are darker. You look like you might be French, while Kitty's certainly Irish."

"Yes, I have been told that I resemble my father's people, while my sister looks much like my mother. I judge so from

a picture, for I do not remember my mother. She died when I was a baby." The girl's dark eyes swept the room. "Who is this?" she asked, for the first time perceiving Jerry who was watching for an opportunity to leave the house unobserved.

"That's Jerry," answered Mrs. Howell. Then, by way of explanation, — "He belongs to a prospecting party up in the mountains. We're pretty good friends, an' he comes down here once in a while to visit a little."

"Oh, you are a miner! I'm very glad to meet you, Mr. Jerry," said the girl with a sweet freedom of manner that took by storm the boy's heart, and made him her willing slave.

That was the first of their great friendship.

Then came many questions about miners, their manner of living, and how they worked, which Jerry, though at first ill at ease, managed to answer satisfactorily, for he had, in truth, lived in the wilds all of his life, ranging from Mexico

to the Canadian border, and there was nothing in the life of that vast unbroken country that he did not understand something about. Many times he and Ike had taken their pans, and far up in the mountains where some tiny stream flowed over the bed-rock, they would wash out the dirt. From sunrise until darkness hid from their sight the bit of yellow gold in the bottom of the pan, they would work. Sometimes they would carry away with them several dollars' worth of gold-dust, or, occasionally, a bag of nuggets, as the case might be.

He and Ike were miners. He had never thought of it before, but somehow it sounded good from the lips of that girl. He felt glad to know that, in reality, they had earned the name. Then he fell to wondering what she would think if she knew what the world called them. If only Ike were free — they would earn the right to a better sounding title. It had never occurred to him so vividly before to be ashamed of the name, — the life. His father had been

a wanderer, had died a wanderer, and the boy loved the life that he had always known, and felt nothing but antagonism toward his enemy, the civilized world. That it held so dainty a maiden had never entered his head. That was one of the things that Ike had failed to teach him. He wished that his friend had been there to see her. At any rate, he would have something to tell him when he returned.

The three men, despairing of a better sight of the "new girl," and lacking the boldness to enter the kitchen, left the house by a back door, and after talking a few minutes with the two brothers, caught their horses, which, still saddled, were grazing at their own free will not far from where their bridle reins had been hastily dropped to the ground. With a last look at the kitchen end of the house, they rode away. Jerry saw them as they left, and a refinement, until then foreign to his nature, made him glad that the girl had not seen them.

They were rough fellows, — the two

Cory boys, Kid and Hank, and their Irish friend, Tim Brady. Since this last trip they looked their calling, perhaps more so than usual, and Jerry, for the first time, felt heartily ashamed of them.

"Yes," said the woman, in answer to a question from the girl, "we have quite a few travelers along here. There's a lot of hunters and prospecters scattered over these mountains, and most of them put up here when they come along."

"I suppose you know all of them," went on the girl, to whom every impression was new and, as a rule, pleasant. Even in the things that otherwise would have been shocking, she found a charm. Her keen sense of humor never failed. It was the blood of her fathers, the best mixture of French and Irish, that told in her make-up, that gave the charm to her eye, the wit to her tongue, the grace to her figure, and the weakness and strength to her nature. It gave her a physical perfection that cannot be described, embodying, as it did, all the graces from a hundred generations of beautiful women.

It is enough to call her beautiful, but that which won the greatest admiration was the compelling charm of her character, which, by her environment in a strange country and under the most trying circumstances, was gradually developed.

The woman was watching her admiringly, and had changed her position to where she could get a better view of the girl's face. She was wondering if this new relative of her husband's was not prettier than the painted actress who had so taken her fancy in town that winter. Jerry thought it strange that the woman could be quiet for so long a time. Then the girl spoke again: —

"Are there many girls of my age in the country?"

"Land, no!" exclaimed the woman, waking up. "They all get married before they're your age!"

"That's a new idea," laughed the girl. "Then according to the standards out here, I must be quite an old maid!"

"There's so many more men out here than there's girls; that's the reason, I

reckon. They'll all be settin' their caps for you as soon as they clap eyes on you. You won't have no trouble to get married," said the woman, assuringly.

The girl had been seated; at this she rose to her feet, and a look not quite pleasant came to her eyes. Hasty words trembled upon her tongue, but she closed her lips firmly.

The woman grew nervous waiting for her to speak, and Jerry felt his face flush that such a thing should have been said to her. Finally her eyes softened; she resumed her chair and spoke in a low tone: — "This is a magnificent country, up here in the mountains, much more beautiful than the plains below where Kitty lives. Even the air is different, and the water seems clearer; — the trees and the flowers, the hills and little valleys. It is grand! Glorious! Doesn't it make you happy, every moment, to be alive!"

"Yes, I suppose so," answered the woman doubtfully. Truly this girl was beyond her comprehension. The few

young women that she had known would not have been displeased with the mere suggestion that she had made; quite to the contrary. A girl was a strange creature not to be interested in marriage! — all there is in life.

The girl turned to the boy and was laughing softly. After she had thought it over, it seemed to her a very good joke; at first upon herself, now she rather enjoyed the woman's discomfort. Jerry was quick to understand her, and she felt pleased in the knowledge that he did so.

"Are you going to stay here long?" asked the boy presently.

"Not this time," she answered. "We are going home to-day, but I intend to come again, often, now that I have learned the way, and I hope to see you many times this summer. Some time I am going up in the mountains to your camp, for I am anxious to see how miners live." At this the boy flushed, and Margaret wondered why he should have been so confused. She thought of it afterward.

"I'd better be gettin' supper if you and Tom are goin' back this evenin', but I don't see why you're in such a hurry to go," said Mrs. Howell, as she bustled about. "My goodness, it's most supper time now! Those men're out there talkin' yet! You'd think they never saw each other more'n once in twenty years."

"I reckon I'd better be going, or Ike 'll think I'm lost for sure," said Jerry, as he reached over and took his hat from the wood-box. Then without another word, he walked with long strides out of the house. He returned almost instantly.

"I about forgot that Ike wanted something to read," he said, ashamed to have forgotten his friend so completely.

"I ain't got a thing in the house but this newspaper," said the woman, producing it. "Tom's man brought it up yesterday, so it ain't very old. I had it over the bread in the oven so it's kind of brown, but I guess it'll do His Highness."

"Who is His Highness?" asked the girl quickly.

"That's Ike, my partner," explained

the boy, before Mrs. Howell could say anything. Then carefully folding the scorched paper, he added, "He's my friend."

His tone conveyed much, and Marjie liked him at that moment better than she had before. He said good-by to her with bashful awkwardness, and she stood in the door and watched him until the little gray pony had taken him out of sight.

CHAPTER IV.

A NEW PHASE OF LIFE.

IT seemed an unconscionably short time to Jerry when he suddenly awakened and found that he had reached the entrance of the Retreat, so busy was he with new thoughts, — the sweet beginning of an almost new existence.

It was not strange that the friendship of a girl like Margaret Navarre brought a sweetness into the boy's barren life that seemed to him like Heaven. Many gorged with all the blessings and benefits of modern civilization might well have envied him, — not only for the promise of the girl's friendship, but for the strange, satisfied happiness that it brought him. A rare feeling, to be sure!

Jerry dismounted just outside the gap of rocks. Instinctively he looked around for Ike, but no one was in sight. The

pony whinnied softly for water, and the boy stepped to one side, making room for it to reach the stream, as he mused: "Pretty little Lady, I guess you think I'm a dandy to let you go all this time without water, but I clean forgot you!" He gently rubbed its soft, sleek coat. "You don't need to think I'm goin' to do it again very soon, but it ain't every day a fellow meets a real lady. Now, drink all you want to, but hurry up about it for we want to find Ike. My, but we've got a lot to tell him to-day!"

When the boy and the gentle Lady reached the cabin, not a sound could be heard, but the boy's quick eyes saw the faint track of men's feet about the door, and the horse pricked up its ears and looked suspiciously toward a clump of brush at the left.

"Horses," said the boy under his breath, "I reckon it's the boys."

There were two rooms in the little cabin, or rather, two small cabins built together with a doorway cut between. The structure was built of small, unhewn

fir logs, and the cracks were daubed with mud. The weeds and grass growing thickly upon the low, dirt roof gave to the whole undeniable evidence of age.

Jerry peered cautiously into the first room through a hole in the chinking used for that purpose. No one was in sight, but protruding from a bunk in the farther room, he saw what he immediately recognized as one of Hank Cory's high-heeled boots. Then he emitted a soft bird-like whistle, the one that Ike had taught him during the long months of their first winter together. No one could imitate it, and they felt that they possessed one thing in common which could never be taken away from them. It was a very useful possession, too, in that uncertain existence. Jerry repeated his whistle several times, but no answer rewarded him. Ike was away, that was evident. Leaving his pony, he stealthily made his way around to the other part of the house, and with great caution peered into the other room through another peep-hole like the first. The three men

lay stretched out on the bunks, sound asleep. Even Jerry's noisy entrance into the room failed to waken them.

The boy was no coward, but he was cautious. It was necessary that he should be. That was one of the things Ike had taught him, that their comradeship demanded.

After a fruitless search about the premises for his friend, and casting a look of superior contempt upon the sleeping men, he mounted his pony and started for the Find, as he called it, where he felt certain Ike was at work. Some distance farther up in the mountains, among rocks so steep and jagged that he was obliged to walk and lead his horse, he gave the signal. The answer came like an echo to his own, and not far distant the man came in sight.

"I was just about to quit work and go home," he said, as he lightly swung himself by some scrubby trees down a rocky bank. "How's this for an afternoon's work?"

The boy opened his eyes wide at the

sight of an unusual amount of gold stored away in the little glass vial. "My, but there must be four or five dollars' worth of gold there! I wish I'd stayed and helped you. No, I don't! I wasn't thinkin'. Say, you just ought to 'a'seen her! I don't believe there was any one like her before, an' I can't tell you just what she looked like, for she didn't look alike any two times, an' I sat there an' watched her for a plumb hour, but she's the prettiest" —

"If you'll tell me what you are talking about," interrupted the man, "whether it's a horse, a cotton-tail rabbit, or an apple, I may be able to enter into your enthusiasm a little better."

"A girl! It's a girl, Ike! Not one of these here sorts you see sometimes, — but a girl, — a different — well, I can't tell you anything about her! I thought I could, but I can't. Wait till you see her!"

The man's face was a study. He was making an earnest effort to appear serious, but mirth gained the mastery, and he

laughed until the rocks rang in echo. It was such an extraordinary thing that this man, who rarely smiled, should laugh so heartily, that Jerry, though knowing that the laughter was at his expense, could not refrain from joining with him. To the man it was a brief forgetfulness of his plight, the bitterness of which ten long years had failed to efface from his memory. The two became silent and walked on, the boy leading his pony, for the man was afoot. The man was the first to speak.

"Well, any news? Or have thoughts of this wonderful girl absorbed all else from your mind?"

"She's the most of the news, herself," answered the boy, with a smile. "But, then, there's more. The boys are back, and I've got a newspaper for you. Lil said that it was a late one, but it's pretty well cooked." He took it from his pocket and handed it to his friend. "Better be careful, or it'll break."

"It *is* rather well done," remarked the man, as he tucked it carefully inside his

shirt. The day had been warm, and he wore no coat. "It would require a different kind of a roasting than that to improve the paper, but it's better than none. So the boys are back. How are they feeling?"

"They were sleeping it off when I come up here to find you. I guess from the looks of 'em that they've been havin' a pretty gay time in town. Kid, he's flush with money, an' he don't care who knows it."

"A natural sequence," said the man, with some bitterness. "You and I would be some happier when we got home if that gang were not lying around drunk. Isn't that so? But it is the inevitable accompaniment to the rest of our misfortunes. But what matters that, — or anything? We will try to find consolation in each other. It's all we can do, and it's something. I try to thank my stars every day that I have you. Let's see, it is five years next month since your father died and left you to my care. What a legacy for a boy!"

Jerry looked up reproachfully.

"It's better than I ever had before, and I guess father thought he had struck a gold mine for me when you told him you'd take care of me. I never would 'a' known anything at all if it hadn't been for you. But the girl, Ike, — you just ought to 'a' seen her!"

"Yes, tell me about her," Ike said suddenly, as though for the first time he had felt an interest in the newcomer.

"She ain't nothing short of a real angel, if there ever was one!" making a bold plunge. "I was wishing all the time that you had gone along, so's you could have seen her. I think her eyes are black, or brown, — or else a dark blue. I'm not sure which."

"Bewitching maiden!" said the man. "But since I am doomed to exist outside the pale of so fair a creature, you might tell me who she is and where she belongs."

"Why, she's that girl from California, — Tom Howell's sister-in-law. Her name's Margaret, — Margaret Navarre.

Tom calls her Marjie. She's come out here to live with her sister, you know. Tom brought her up from his place this afternoon, and they're going back this evening. They must be on their way home by now." Then, at last, the boy found language to express to his friend some of the charms of Marjie, — how she looked and what she said. He opened his heart in a long and many-worded recital which lasted until they reached the Retreat. In spite of the unpleasantness that awaited them at the cabin, a feeling of great contentment and perfect harmony enveloped them, until a quiet smile illumed the man's face, and from the throat of the boy burst forth a song. What caused it?

Was it the magnificent twilight, the last leave-taking of the sun, that in tenderness clothed every peak and mountain-top with its own red-gold, — or was it the girl?

CHAPTER V.

BANISHMENT OF THE ROUGH ELEMENT FROM THE RETREAT.

THE interior of the cabin was not unlike that of many others in the country. The uncovered log walls emphasized the barrenness of the two rooms, whose only furniture consisted of a few boxes which served as chairs, some home-made bunks, a sort of mess-box and table, and a small camp stove.

As Ike entered the cabin, he flung one swift glance about him, noting with impatience the three men deep in their long-delayed sleep. It was but the work of a moment to build a fire in the small stove, and by the time Jerry had taken care of his pony and tramped into the house, the kettle was singing merrily and the meager supper was nearly prepared.

"I'll just go and call them easy," said Jerry, "and if they don't want to get up, why, we'll eat in peace."

"An' is it callin' us aisy loike, you'd be after doin'? And me that hungry I could eat me hat!" demanded the Irishman, as he raised himself to the edge of the bunk, where he sat poised for a moment, yawning and stretching his long arms up over his head. "Here, you lazy lumpkins!" he continued, as he stood upon one foot and gave the nearest man a forcible kick, "would yez be slapin' forever while dacent folks be waitin' upon ye?"

"You go straight to Hell!" growled Hank Cory, "if you ain't too blamed cussed to get there!"

"Sure, it's yerself that'll be pilotin' me there one o' these foine days, me boy! But there'll be little supper awaitin' us at the end of our route, I'm thinkin', so ye'd better get up and partake of what's set before yez while there's loife in yer body an' an inclination to eat."

"What's that you fellers are preachin' about?" said a voice from the farther

bunk. Then Kid Cory, wide awake, jumped to his feet, and with an ominous glare in his black eyes, drew his gun upon the others. His brother Hank, a natural coward, crouched back upon the bed.

"I ain't done nothin', Kid," he whimpered. "Put up your gun."

The Irishman scratched his head and looked into the other room, as if to seek protection there.

"Go outside if you want to practice target shooting," said Ike in a quiet voice, as he stepped into the room and faced the upraised gun. Then the wild light died out of Kid's eyes; his hand dropped to his side, and as he put his six-shooter in his belt, he said in a subdued voice but without apology, "Supper most ready?"

The warm meal cleared the brains of the three men and loosened their tongues; though, to be sure, that was the perpetual condition of the Irishman's. Tim vied with the woman, Lil, in conversational accomplishment, but it is a strange fact that when the two were together, neither one had much to say. Perhaps

they were afraid to begin. But there was nothing the matter with Tim's flow of speech this particular night as the men sat around the rough table. He acted as mouthpiece for the others, and described at length some of their experiences since leaving the camp. They had visited a small town many miles away, and great and varied had been their adventures. "But the worst of it was," he concluded, "we didn't get to see the new girl,— but as far as I could see she was as pretty a morsel as ever I laid me eye on!"

By the dim light of the one small lamp Ike proceeded with some difficulty to read the scorched newspaper that Jerry had brought from the ranch. He paid small heed to the talk of the three men, whose conversation was growing more general and more unrefined. The boy listened to their chatter, but occasionally the vision of a sweet girlish face rose before him,— the room faded,— the men seemed indistinct and their voices a long way off. He almost believed that he had been asleep. But he awoke suddenly

from his dream with the feeling that something was wrong. Ike had thrown his paper upon the table, and with impatient eyes watched the movements of Kid who walked restlessly up and down the room and at length halted directly before him, saying with some insolence: —

"You, with your devil's luck at cards, why didn't you go to town with us? You'd 'a' made more money than you would in a year breakin' your back over that there gold dust. But the luck's mine now, I tell you! The luck's mine! Do you hear? I won everything I run up against in town, an' I'll play *you* for all the dust you've got!"

"If you win," asked the man quietly, "how about our winter's supply of grub?"

"Winter?" answered Kid, "who's thinkin' about winter this time of the year? We may all be in Kingdom Come by that time! I reckon you're afraid to play with me, ain't you? Here," he cried, pulling out a large roll of bills, "just put up your gold dust ag'in' that!"

The man looked at him sharply.

"How did you come by that? Honestly?"

"Cards," answered Kid, to which the others affirmed.

"If you won it fair and square," the man observed, "I don't mind playing with you. But I don't want dirt money, for I'm certainly going to win if I play. You'd better think it over."

Kid fought with almost inarticulate oaths that came from his throat in a low, rasping sound. He was fast becoming excited. "I tell you my luck's changed! Put up your money if you ain't a white-livered coward!"

At this there came a look in the man's face that portended a storm, but only the boy saw it, as he noticed everything that concerned his friend. The table was cleared, and the two men began their game of poker, while the others drew near and watched them breathlessly. Ike played with ease, seemingly unconcerned as to whether he lost or won. His tranquillity exasperated Kid, who grew momentarily more excited, and then he lost,

hand after hand, until nothing remained of his large roll but one bill. That he staked and lost, then with an oath he sprang to his feet and drew his gun. If his action was quick, Ike was quicker, and the fire that had smothered so long burst forth at last, as with one stroke of his strong arm the gun went flying half way across the room, and before the other men had time to realize what was going on, he had taken the outlaw by the collar and was shaking him as though he had been a dog. Kid's face turned white, and he said not a word; indeed, he had no opportunity to do so. His brother Hank was about to interfere, when Jerry quickly picked up the gun from the floor and remarked: —

"You just keep out of that or I'll give you a taste of this! Stand there in the corner, or Ike'll finish you when he gets through with Kid!"

"Sure, an' the boy is right! Now don't that look for all the world loike a cat shakin' a poor little mouse? By the Holy Smoke, I wouldn't wonder if His

Highness was takin' him down to the creek to give him a bath! A bit of a washin' won't hurt him anyways." The Irishman made many remarks befitting the occasion, and with him Jerry had no trouble, and but little with the other man whose noble intentions toward his brother were fast giving way before his own cowardice, so that he was glad to remain in the shelter of the cabin.

The sound of receding footsteps brought upon Jerry the conviction that His Highness's thread of patience had snapped, and that this was the last of the undesired element in the Retreat. "You'd better get up your horses and follow Kid, unless you want Ike to come after you. He's powerful strong," observed the boy.

After considering for a moment, Hank acted on this suggestion and marched out into the night. Ike had forcibly walked the outlaw to the entrance of the Retreat. With his hand still grasping his collar, he spoke for the first time: —

"I've befriended you for five years, you miserable wretch,— but this ends it!"

Then putting the roll of money into the pocket of the now thoroughly terrified man, he went on slowly,— "I've done with the three of you. If you ever set foot inside this place again you won't get off so easily!"

The fellow muttered something unintelligible, turned about, and slowly walked away. Ike watched him until he was lost in the shadows of the night, then he leaned against one of the boulders and waited. He must have forseen that Hank would follow his brother, and he did not have long to wait until the man, leading a horse, rode slowly up and stopped some distance from where the bright moon revealed His Highness's dark figure waiting patiently beside the rocks.

"You ain't got no call to treat Kid like that, but bein' as you have, I'll take his horse to him, that is" — he added nervously as no answer came to him, "if you ain't got no objection."

"You've saved me the trouble to ask you to leave," said the man beside the stream, "in other words, to clear out. I

have to-night come to the conclusion that a quieter life will be better for me,—and for the rest of you. From now on I claim absolute right to this place, and anyone that tries to interfere with my privacy will endanger his health. Understand? Your brother will be able to explain the details a trifle more clearly. I will tell Tim that you are anxious for his company. Good-evening!"

Hank rode forward slowly. After he passed the man, he stopped his horse and turned about in the saddle.

"You ain't agoin' to shoot, be you?" he asked, then continued in a whining tone, "you know I ain't done anything to you, an' I ain't responsible fur what Kid does. I know he didn't have no right to draw his gun on you, for you played square. There ain't another hidin' place as good as this in the country! You don't mean to turn us out, do you? I'm sorry"—

"Just move on, please," interrupted the man. "You will find your brother somewhere down the gulch. I have

nothing against you, and I will help any of you in any way except this. I want this place to myself. Don't misunderstand me, and don't waste any more words. Now go!"

Every word was short, crisp, and deliberate. There was no mistaking the meaning. Hank turned back in his saddle and slowly made off, overtaking his brother a few rods farther on.

In the silence of the Retreat His Highness listened to the sound of hoofs as the horses trotted over loose stones, or splashed through the water, then knowing that the two men would rest well in Howell's bunk-house that night, he walked slowly back to his own little cabin.

It required some trouble and a great amount of talk to convince the Irishman that he must follow them. But finally these two, the man and the boy who had so longed for this very thing, were left alone in their Retreat, and the man, at least, realized that his act had been a rash one, and that this was but the beginning — of what?

CHAPTER VI.

A CASE WHERE WIT CONQUERS OBSTINACY.

MARJIE sat on a low bench beneath an open window. The early morning was sultry and warm, giving promise of an uncomfortable day, — a day seemingly out of place in early June. The girl looked almost wistfully across the stretch of prairie to where the snow-drifts still unmelted streaked the sides of the distant mountain tops. A pair of soft arms from the window above reached down and clasped her about the neck, drawing her face upward.

"Ah, my Marjie, go over there where your eyes are leading you and get me a nice, big snowball. Or, better, we will both go and take the babies; — then what a frolic! But they say the drifts are

very deep, else the snow would be melted long ago. Great coulees and ravines all filled to the top and packed solid by the winds."

The girl kissed one of the soft hands as she released it, then laughing softly, stood up and leaned into the window beside her sister.

"It does look as though we could walk to it, and do you know, Kitty, before I went up there last week, I had many a mind to try it. But the miles were long and numerous as I found, though Tom humored me by allowing me to go as slowly as I pleased."

"It won't be long before the miles are short to you, — as nothing; then, my sister, you will be gone from me much, I fear."

But the little woman's eyes were bright with happiness as she said it, for in her husband and babies she had found her Heaven long before Marjie had come. The girl, though like a ray of sunshine, added but little to the young mother's already well-filled life. But as Tom had

said, it was not well for a woman to be always alone, and they were both thankful in their hearts that Marjie had come to them.

They were proud of this girl from the western civilization, — proud of her beauty, her brightness, and her thousand little graces. Even now after several weeks, they had not tired of watching her with admiration as she romped and played with the two small children. The boy of four, and the small, toddling girl were a source of great pleasure to her, for she had never been with children before, and every day she found new wonders, — new revelations in them.

Kind, honest Tom Howell gave her a strong brotherly love from the moment that he first saw her, and nothing was too good for this little sister, as he was wont to say.

This morning he had ridden far, hunting horses, and from a number that he had driven into the corral, he picked out two which he thought might be suitable

for Marjie to ride. These he led up to the house for inspection, remarking as he stroked the neck of one of the sleek animals:

"It's a toss-up between them, but this seems a little the likeliest, and I believe it's the least bit easier riding."

"It's a beauty," exclaimed the girl, moving forward and cautiously petting the one, — "but so is the other. I can't tell them apart. I think, Tom, that I will take them both."

"Well, you must be intending to *ride!* In a month you'll need a whole string of horses, according to this. But you can have them as well as not. Haven't got any other use for them. I've been going to break them to drive for the last two years, because they're so well-matched, but never got around to it yet. Wouldn't they make a pretty pair of drivers, though? I'll have to put it off till next winter, so you can have them just as well as not. I guess you'll be giving old Sour Beans a rest now. I'll keep this one up for you, and when he gets played out and kind of

thin, you can get up the other and turn this one out."

"I'm ever so much obliged to you, Tom, and I'm sure that Sour Beans will appreciate it, too, though I think that I am the one that is entitled to a rest, and I hope that this one will prove easier. Poor Sour Beans!"

The girl with affected dejection looked toward a bunch of horses where a faded sorrel nag was rollicking about as though it had never owned a stiff joint and was far from being the slowest, roughest saddle animal on the place. But as Tom had said, it was just the thing for a beginner.

Long before the noon hour, Marjie had mounted the fresh bay and was speeding rapidly across the prairie.

"Don't worry, Kitty," she said, as she slipped a sandwich into the saddle pocket, "I will probably be back in a couple of hours, if not, then later. But my lucky star never deserts me. Nothing can happen to me!" And laughing gaily, she rode away.

But Kitty never worried. That was, perhaps, the one secret of her happiness. She trusted blindly, cheerfully, to the future. In that respect Marjie was like her, as is all true youth.

The girl had gone several miles, following down a dimly marked road which led along a small creek. It was the same stream that flowed past the ranch in the mountains, but after flowing for miles over beds of alkali, looked vastly changed.

There had been a heavy rain storm, or cloudburst, the day before, and the stream had overflown, leaving a soft mud upon its banks. Several times the horse had sunk to its ankles, and Marjie had been obliged to avoid certain places by taking a roundabout way. She had just skirted one mud-hole, when she espied in the distance what at first she thought to be tents, but soon discovered to be white covered wagons at a standstill. She rode on and quickly came up with two large "prairie schooners." The wheels of the first one were imbedded in the soft, sticky mud, while two tired looking horses

were making futile attempts to dislodge it, aided by an old man who sat upon the seat and threatened them with a well worn willow and many harmless words of encouragement.

"Now, Pa, if you ain't never goin' to move on, we might just as well camp right here!" called a shrill voice from the rear wagon, and an elderly woman climbed down from the seat and over the wheel to get a better view of the situation. As she moved away from the wagon, Marjie crossed the creek from a point farther up, and rode over to her.

"Can I be of any assistance to you? I see that you're in a little difficulty," said the girl earnestly. The woman looked her over from head to foot critically.

"Well, I don't know," she finally answered. "You might if you had a four hoss team an' a yoke of oxen. But I'm just as much obliged fur your good intentions, — that is, I s'pose they're good."

The girl laughed under her breath, then slipped from her saddle and stood beside the little faded woman.

"Of course they are good! And I wish I did have a whole string team here this moment. Your horses look tired."

"Yes, they're plumb played out, an' so 're we, too. Been on the trail now fur nigh onto three months. Yes, an' it ain't very good travelin' neither, in all kinds of weather. But we're huntin' a place. Come all the way up from Idaho. Your folks live anywhere about here?"

"Yes, my sister and her husband, — four or five miles from here. But how are you ever going to get that wagon out of the mud?"

"Well, one time we just had to let it stay till the mud dried up somewhat, then we all set to work an' dug. I ain't none so sure but we'll have to do it this time."

"Oh, that's too bad! There must be some way out. Every moment it stays there it settles deeper. If you could get that wagon out you could find a better crossing for the other one somewhere else." Then with a sudden thought, she exclaimed: — "Why don't you hitch both teams together?"

"Well, you see, my man, he's kind of funny about some things. Now he 'lows to pull that wagon out with that there team of hisn, an' he'd git mighty touchy if I'd hint at any sich thing. 'Twouldn't be no better if my daughters, here, tried to interfere. Hi, he don't 'low no meddlin' from wimmen folks."

The woman talked brightly and seemed happily resigned to her fate.

From the wagon in the rear three or four heads peered curiously, the old man gave his whip and his tongue a rest, and bending down over the side of his wagon, looked to see what a stranger was doing there.

"It's a shame," continued the girl. "I am sure if he only had that other team on there, they would get that wagon out in no time."

"But he won't," declared the woman. "It ain't no use 'tall. You'd jest waste your breath."

"Well, don't say a word. I'm going to try, anyway. I believe that he will do it."

Marjie mounted, and walking her horse out into the mud beside the intrenched wagon, smilingly assailed the old man.

"Good-morning!"

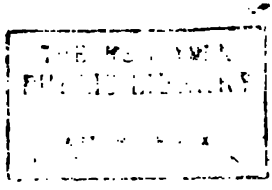
"Same to you," responded the old man. "It's good enough over head, but it ain't so all-fired good under foot."

"No," said the girl, "that's so." Then looking down suddenly at the mired wagon, she exclaimed in the utmost surprise, "Why, you're stuck in the mud, arn't you? Now that's too bad. I'll go right back to the ranch and get you another team. It's only a few miles from here."

"You won't do no such thing! I'm just as much obliged to you, young woman, but I've another team of my own back here, an' I'll be out o' this hole quicker'n you can say Jack Robinson!"

She had touched his vanity, or his pride, for though she did not fully realize it, he was one of the most independent men that ever existed. Perhaps she divined it from his wife's conversation,—

"But it ain't so all-fired good under foot."



for obstinacy and independence are closely akin. However it was, he climbed down from that wagon with the agility of a boy, and waded back through the mud.

"Here, you, Taggie," he called to a young girl who put her curly head out of the wagon and laughed at him as he struggled through the mud, "git down out o' there an' unhook them horses. Seems like some o' you wimmen folks might 'a' had that done before this!"

CHAPTER VII.

A STRANGE RECOGNITION.

ABOUT four o'clock that afternoon, Marjie led the small caravan through the ranch gate, then rode on before them to the house.

"Well, what in the world have you picked up out on the prairie, little sister?" laughed Tom, as he stepped out from the shady porch.

"They're some friends of mine," said the girl, leaning over slightly and speaking with great seriousness. "Their name is Winter, and they are real nice people. They're hunting for a ranch, and seem to be very tired traveling across the country. I asked them to come here and camp until they found some place to live. I thought it would be nice to have them here for a while; they are really nice,

good people and, — well interesting. I knew that you wouldn't care."

She ended with a slight questioning tone in her voice, and looked too innocently sweet to be resisted.

"Oh, no, certainly not! Bring all the folks you want, — have 'em stay as long as they like, and if it gets too crowded, we'll move out. Guess we've got grub enough to last a few days. How many is there in the outfit?"

She stiffened in her saddle.

"Oh, they've got their own food and beds and — everything, and I thought they could camp down there by the creek on the other side of the fence. It never occurred to me that you would object to anything as harmless as that! It is really an unfortunate mistake! I will ride over before they get here and tell them that they are not welcome."

She drew up the bridle reins as she spoke, but Tom detained her, his honest eyes showing as much alarm as though he had not seen the half-suppressed smile that hovered over the look of assumed injury.

"You won't do anything of the kind!" he exclaimed. "I'll go and tell them they're welcome to camp outside the fence as long as they want to. You get down and run in. There's company here, and we've been waiting for you to come home."

"Thank you, Tom! You're a dear," she said, as he swung her lightly to the ground.

She stooped to pet the great hounds that gathered around her, rubbing their warm bodies against her skirt and licking her hands with their soft tongues, trying in dog fashion to tell her that they were sorry they had been away when she started out for her ride, as they generally accompanied her. Then in more than human fashion, they showed the love from their true, faithful hearts. In a moment she passed into the house followed by four pairs of sad, wistful eyes.

The monotonous regularity of a woman's rasping voice informed the girl, before she opened the door, that one

of the visitors was Mrs. Howell — ordinarily called Lil. She sat near the door, screening with her huge form the other occupants of the room. As Marjie entered, the woman did not cease speaking, but changing her theme without taking breath, went on: —

"Pretty hot day to go visitin', ain't it? How'd do? George had to drive some cattle down here, an' I was wishin' powerful to go along with him, but I ain't much good at ridin' horseback, a little too stout, you know. I was a thinkin' about it an' wishin' I could 'a' went, when who'd come along but Jerry, here. So I just thought I'd get him to hitch up a team to the spring wagon an' drive me down here, bein' as I owe you folks a visit, anyway. So we got here pretty near as quick as George. I don't know, if the day hadn't been so hot, but we'd 'a' beat him here. Don't you think so, Jerry? That's a pretty good team; I reckon they can't be beat."

Marjie nodded brightly to them all, and seated herself upon a covered box,

where she waited patiently in a listening attitude for the woman to cease talking. It suddenly occurred to Lil, that perhaps the girl might have something to say, so she broke off abruptly, assuming her best manners.

From an inner room came the sweet voice of the young mother as she sang the little one to sleep. Marjie listened for a moment, a soft look flashing across her sweet face, then she told them about her adventure and of the new acquaintances that she found. Turning to Jerry, she added: —

"And there are four girls in the family. Just imagine, four new girls! And the youngest one of them is the dearest thing! They call her Taggie, — such an odd name. But not nearly so odd as the other girls' names. I nearly tumbled off my horse when their mother introduced them to me. The funniest combinations! You see, their last name is Winter, and the oldest girl is called Ice, the next, Snow, and the third, Frost. Doesn't that seem to lower the tempera-

ture? I can't understand why they didn't give the little one a chilling name, also. Perhaps they ran short. I am going to ask them sometime."

At this Jerry moved uneasily in his chair, opened his mouth as though surprised and about to say something, then, thinking better, closed it again firmly. It caused Marjie to wonder for an instant, but the others had not noticed him. Mrs. Howell's eyes were not particularly quick, and those of George Howell were fastened upon the girl's fair face.

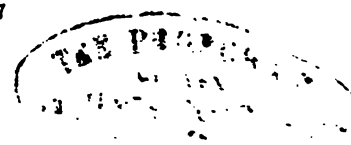
Sometime later, Marjie walked with Jerry down through the field to where the travelers had put up a tent.

"It doesn't take a very great time in this country to set up light housekeeping," she laughed. "But what fun it must be! How strange that you should know them, Jerry."

The boy's face flushed, and he answered quickly: —

"How do you know that I know them? I never said so!"

"No, that is true. You didn't say so,



— not in words; but you do know them, do you not?"

It was second nature to Jerry to be secretive, — a part of his life. For a moment he did not know how to answer the girl.

"Well, I used to know a family down in Idaho that had names something like them. But I was pretty young, and if it's the same ones, they most likely won't know me any more. So I thought I'd just say nothin' about it unless they did recognize me."

"If they don't know you, why I won't say anything about it; you may be sure of that, Jerry. I'm real good at keeping things to myself. There, that's Taggie, the young one! Now she has gone inside the tent again. Doesn't she look like a pretty boy with that short, curly hair of hers? The other girls are — well, no longer young. But they are all nice and — odd."

Mrs. Winter met them at the wagon and invited them to go inside of the tent, making many apologies as she led the

way for its appearance and lack of comfort. The old man was down on his knees putting up the camp stove, while the young girl, Taggie, held a small, rusty stove-pipe in place for him. She blushed deeply as the flap of the tent closed upon the callers and revealed a young man, and she looked down instantly and shame-facedly at her bare feet.

"Hold that 'air pipe stiddy if you ever expect me to git this thing up 'fore midnight. How'd do?" he said, as he glanced up and saw the cause of his daughter's uneasiness. "Jest take some seats if you can find any. This here stove is a plumb nuisance. The big bolt got jolted out o' the bottom 'bout a month ago, an' it's been a heap o' trouble to git it together ever since."

While the old man continued talking, Marjie nudged the boy and whispered: — "What's your name? Your last one, I mean. I want to introduce you."

Jerry looked startled, then answered slowly, "Hendricks, — Jerry Hendricks."

Just then Mrs. Winter entered the tent with some chairs, and Marjie said:— "I almost forgot to introduce my friend. This is Jerry." The woman looked at him in her sharp, penetrating way.

"Seems like I've seen you somewheres before." Turning to her husband, she inquired, — "Hi, ain't you seen this young man somewheres?"

The old man got up from his knees and surveyed the boy in much the same fashion that his wife had done. Jerry's face looked expressionless and stony.

"What's yer name?" he inquired sharply.

The boy's face did not change expression as he faced the man unflinchingly, and answered, — "Jerry Hendricks."

A quick look passed between the man and his wife,— a look that to Marjie told of mystery, unsolved and alluring, but not a word was spoken. Finally the old man pointed to the chairs, saying, — "Set down, and make yourselves at home." Then he turned and walked abruptly out of the tent.

They did not remain there long, and when Marjie delivered the milk and eggs that Kitty had sent over, they walked back through the field. Jerry was uncommonly quiet, and the girl, failing to draw him out, hummed happily to herself, and gathered as she went a few wild flowers. Just before they reached the house, she turned to him quickly and remarked: — "You are a nice boy. I like you. We will be real friends, won't we? Then, sometime, I will call upon you, up there in your mountain home, — on you, and Ike, your partner, — and get a little glimpse of how miners and bachelors live. And those people down there," she added, pointing with her bouquet of flowers, "they are very peculiar, — and you can trust me."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE WAY OF THE WORLD.

THE boy would perhaps have answered much, but no befitting words came to him. Afterward he thought of many things that he could have said, but the fear that he might stumble, that he would say something to betray himself, held him dumb. For all the world he would not have this girl know the reputation that he bore, or the life that he had lived. He was sure that he could trust her absolutely, for already he felt implicit confidence in her. But there was Ike; — that would keep him silent always. Finally two little words, "Thank you," came to his tongue, and he spoke them from a full heart. He might in time become a good, steady man of the world, but he felt then that

the shadow of the past would cling to him through life. He did not realize that Time is a great blotter.

When they reached the house they found Mrs. Howell seated in her spring wagon, patiently waiting for Jerry. With a ponderously uneasy shifting of her position, she said: — "I tried to get George to drive me back so's you could stay longer an' come home on his horse. But George, he wouldn't have it that way, so I guess you'll have to come along. He says he wants to stay for a while an' talk to Tom, an' he'll ketch up with us before we git there. I ain't a carin' noways, only I thought mebbe you'd like to stay yourself. But bein' as we've got to git back to-night, we'll have to be a movin'. I'd like powerful well to stay longer, for I ain't had half a talk with you folks; but the best of friends must part, you know. So jump in, Jerry, an' we'll go, for if I stay much longer, we won't git home to-night, — an' no moon, either. We have to go pretty slow, for it's kind o' muddy in

some places. This's a pretty heavy wagon, an' there's some mighty steep grades to climb." She continued thus until the boy, with a touch of the whip, started the horses, and they, anxious to reach their pasture, went off at a rapid gait.

George Howell watched them gloomily until they were far on the other side of the field, then he turned around to speak to Margaret, but she had disappeared. He saw her, however, as he rode away. She was just returning from the Winters' camp, and he stopped his horse beside her, and speaking courteously, remarked: "I was wondering if I was going to get to say good-by to you. You've been down to those people?"

"Yes," answered the girl, "with some bread and cake that Kitty thought they might like. She is always thoughtful, you know."

"And isn't Marjie always thoughtful?" queried the man.

"I'm afraid she isn't — always — of other people," was the reply. "But of

herself, — yes, I believe that I can safely say she is."

"I don't believe that," he said earnestly. "It is true I haven't seen very much of you — yet, but I haven't got you sized up like that."

"Well, if you imagine that I possess an unusual amount of goodness, you are apt to be most terribly shocked some day, for I am no saint," came Marjie's assertion with a twinkle in her eye. "I'm just a common, every-day girl, looking for a good time. When old age overtakes me I will think about being saintly."

The man was silent for a moment, watching her, but something in her glance made him look away over the vast expanse of rolling prairie land.

"You have quite a ride before you. Don't you dread it?" she asked.

"Well, no, not much. But I wish you were going with me. I wanted to see you before I went to tell you that I — that we are expecting you to come up to stay several days. You'll come, won't

you? Maybe you'll find me as hospitable as Tom."

"Oh, it seems so good to have people of your own, people who care!" exclaimed Marjie impulsively. "Of course I'll go! And you will be another brother to me like Tom! Won't that be jolly? I'll just explore those mountains from top to bottom! I've been wild to get up on the top-most peak."

"Well, be sure and come soon. Now don't forget, or I'll be down here after you. 'Round here, you see, we're not used to waiting when goin' will fetch results," said the man as he rode away.

Marjie walked happily to the house.

A few days later, the day after the Winter family took up their tent and set out to locate upon a suitable claim that they had found, Marjie had an opportunity to take the desired trip to the mountains. One of the men that worked for Tom was going up there for some cattle, so the girl went with him. She would willingly have gone alone, but Tom feared that she was not familiar

enough with the road. They made an early start, reaching the Howell ranch in the middle of the forenoon. The woman, Lil, who always insisted upon doing her own housework, was down upon her knees scrubbing the kitchen floor, and did not see Marjie until she entered the room.

"Land o' goodness!" she exclaimed, raising her scrub brush aloft. "You about scared me to death! I'm glad to see you, though. Just make yourself to home; I'll be through with this floor in a minute. I was just thinkin' this mornin' that I'd better scrub up, for mebbe you'd be along. An' you sure caught me right in the act! Come up alone? No? Jim Barns? Well, Jim's 'lowing to drive down some of those cattle, I reckon. I see that outfit that was camped by your place come by here yesterday, an' they're goin' to take up a place right above here. It's kind of hard when people get to crowdin' in on you like that, but then we can't expect to hold all the land on this side of the mountains. That's what I told George,

but he was mighty put out about it, just the same. I reckon he'll try to buy 'em out after awhile. You've come to stay a few days, ain't you? Well, I've got the spare room fixed up for you, an' I've been callin' it your room, — Marjie's room. George says when he goes into town that he'll get some more fixings for it, for it's kind o' bare now. We don't care much about style up here. George, he's gone away, but I expect him back for dinner. Ain't you kind o' hungry after your ride? Just step over to that cupboard and help yourself. No? Well, I'll start dinner pretty quick. I've just got this little place under the table to scrub. My, but that's hard work! I'll have to get up a bit and take the kink out of my back." The woman rose with difficulty. In an instant Marjie had taken her place upon the floor, and was scrubbing as though she had done nothing else all her life.

"You go and sit down," said the girl laughingly, "and let me show you how beautifully I can scrub."

"You'll get your clothes all slopped up!" exclaimed the woman. "Just look at me. Well, bless my stars, if you ain't got it most done already. Here, stand up an' put this apron around you or I won't let you do it!" So saying, the woman took one from the wall and wrapped its huge folds about the girl, who, holding the scrubbing brush away from her, laughed heartily as the woman pinned it high up under her arms.

"Now go to it," said the woman, smiling at the figure the girl made. "Now, if you don't look just like a dressed up doll, I don't want a cent. I'll just go down cellar and bring up some truck for dinner." The woman shambled out, while the girl continued her task. She was working briskly when she looked up suddenly and saw George Howell standing in the open doorway, staring at her with the utmost astonishment. Marjie blushed slightly, frowned, and then continuing her work, said in a rich Irish brogue: —

"Is it the masther ye are, sirr? Sure

an I'm the new sarvant. Do yez mane that ye've come fur yer dinner an' it not up out of the cellar yet!"

"Well, I like this," he finally voiced. "You come here visiting and then have to get down and scrub a dirty floor! It makes me feel ashamed!"

"Don't," said Marjie, rising to her feet. "It isn't becoming,— besides, I've only scrubbed eighteen square inches. So you will forgive me, won't you? And you haven't said that you are glad to see me, my new brother! But of course you are. Your scowling face shows it."

"Well, I sure didn't expect you home so soon, George," said his wife, as laden with a dishpan full of potatoes and canned goods she came laboriously up out of the cellar. "You must 'a' known Marjie was here!"

CHAPTER IX.

AN INTERRUPTED SLEEP.

THE remainder of that day, the first among strange people, in a novel, unfamiliar atmosphere, passed quickly and pleasantly to Marjie. She enjoyed everything, from the woman's tiresome jangle to the man's nervous attentions, with the unimpaired taste of early youth. There were no clouds in the sky of her bright new holidays. She had accompanied the woman to her garden that afternoon and admired the neatly planted rows of young vegetables, she had gone to the corral and watched the man, Jim, start a small bunch of cattle down toward the prairie, and later had walked up to the old deserted cabin at the mouth of the timbered gulch. Before darkness had fully settled down upon the long June evening, she

retired gratefully to the room that the woman, Lil, had prepared for her at the end of the ranch house. As the woman had said, the room was bare and devoid of furniture, there was no curtain at the window, but the bed was comfortable, as Marjie discovered after she had fastened her long coat up over the small window and hastily prepared for sleep.

It was past midnight when the pounding of horses' feet on the hard ground outside the house caused Marjie to waken suddenly, half alarmed. All about her was in total darkness, not even the faintest ray of light showing beneath the window's heavy covering. But she laughed at her fears, dismissed the idea that it was morning, and groped about the sides of the room for the window, which, finding at last, she opened and peered out into the darkness of the night.

The forms of several men were silhouetted against the light log walls of the bunk-house, and an indistinct mumble of gruff voices could be heard; but besides

a few emphatic oaths and broken sentences, nothing definite came to the ears of the girl, who, fully awake, sat beside the open window more in wonder than in fear, and watching withal. Who were the men dimly shown through the darkness, and what were they going to do? All at once the sound of their voices ceased, as from a door farther down came the unmistakable bulk of the woman, Lil, and a voice which carried well, broke the stillness: —

"You fellers ain't got no more brains than a grasshopper! What do you want to make such a racket around here for, anyway? Don't you know that the girl's in the end room there, an' you'll be wakin' her up the first thing you know! George, you just take the boys into the bunk-house, and don't let me hear any more noise around this here place to-night!" Without a word the men slowly moved away, the woman went inside and closed the door, and in a few minutes a light shone dimly through the grimy windows of the bunk-house.

The excitement was over, and after watching the light in the bunk-house for a short time and wondering what it all meant, Marjie went back to her bed. In the morning she half imagined it had been a dream, so fanciful it seemed. The woman had been up for hours, although it was yet early, for the sun had not climbed far over the mountain tops.

"I guess you must have slept well, for you're as bright as a dollar," was the woman's greeting as Marjie entered the kitchen. "I've got some news for you. Jerry come along about an hour ago an' I told him you was here. He was mighty pleased to hear it, an' he's gone down to the creek to ketch some fish for your breakfast. Ain't that the kind of a boy to have around?"

"Jerry here? Oh, I'm so glad!" exclaimed the girl, forgetting the questions she intended to ask about the midnight visitors. "I'll go down and find him. Did you say he went *down* the creek?"

"Yes, down. Run along. It'll do

you good before breakfast, and I'll have it ready by the time you come back."

Bare-headed, the girl ran down the path, and the woman called after her: "Tell Jerry not to ketch all the fish out of the creek, an' to come along back an' have breakfast with you!"

Marjie nodded in answer and ran on with the happy freedom of a child. It was a glorious day, and her thoughts ran as lightly and quickly as her feet. A great hawk flew past and soared high above her head, and watching it as she ran, she came abruptly to a standstill almost in the arms of a large man whom she had run unceremoniously against.

"Oh! I beg your pardon!" she exclaimed breathlessly, as she disengaged herself. "I should have looked, but it was the hawk. Did you see it? Such a large one! I hope I didn't frighten you. This brush makes it difficult to see far ahead, but isn't it lovely?"

"Not one-half as lovely as you," answered the man. "Aren't you afraid the sun will burn your face?"

The girl's ardor cooled suddenly. Her expression changed with her mood. She looked at him steadily and thoughtfully as she said: "I do not like that. But since you are my new brother,— another brother to me like Tom,— it is out of my power to object. But from anyone else it would be intolerable! I positively detest anything like that, — it is so empty and meaningless. I am just as much obliged to you for thinking me fair, but I'm not to blame for that, — so, please, don't remind me of it again."

He would have answered, but she ran past him, saying over her shoulder as she went: "I'm hunting for Jerry. He is fishing. Could you tell me which way he went?"

"I ain't seen him since he came, but I don't think he's gone very far," answered the man politely, as he walked on, confused, yet self-contained. The girl was as queer and complex as his own life had lately grown to be, a fact which just then was bothersome.

A few steps farther on, Marjie came

unexpectedly upon the boy who motioned her to be quiet, then gave his whole attention to the sharp-eyed trout. Finally he turned around to her and remarked as he twisted his line about the willow rod: "I guess they won't bite any more in this hole. Anyway, I've got enough, don't you think so? Here, you can string 'em on this willow if you want to."

She looked at him in perplexity, then touched one of the bright-colored fellows very cautiously with the tip of her finger. "Wait a minute," she said nervously. "I never touched a live fish before in my life." Then laughing at his look of astonishment, went on: "You think that queer, don't you, — that a girl of my age should confess to such a thing? But I never went fishing in my life, though I have always lived near the ocean. Ever since I can remember, my aunt was an invalid, and after my study hours I was always with her. We were great companions," she added quickly to the boy's look of commiseration. "I have never regretted it. She taught me many, many

things. My life with her was very happy in spite of the great, dreary house. One thing she taught me was that one can accomplish anything that one sets determinedly about, so *I* am going to *string* these fish, as you say, if you will give me the faintest idea of how it is done." She was bravely holding a wriggling fish in her hand, which Jerry took from her, and with great seriousness showed her how to string upon the willow fork. In a moment her quick fingers had strung the ten fine trout, which, holding out at arm's length, she proudly surveyed. The boy took them from her, she washed her hands in the creek, and then the two started back to the house.

"I am very glad you came, Jerry," said the girl, as they walked along. "No one called yesterday, and I was wondering seriously if I could find your camp. That reminds me, — was there anyone here when you came this morning?"

"No one at all," answered the boy, "but George and Lil."

"That's queer. Such a strange thing

happened in the night. I was wakened suddenly by the sound of horseback riders, coming pell-mell past my window. Everything was so still about the place when I went to sleep, that for a moment I was frightened and couldn't realize where I was. Then it was so dark in the room, and I had such a time to find the window. It was really ridiculous the way in which I managed to stumble and fall about that room. When I finally did reach the window, I looked out, and there at the end of the bunk-house were three or four horseback riders, — men, judging from their voices and their swearing. They seemed to be arguing some point, but I couldn't understand what they said. Then Mrs. Howell opened the door and said something that made them all move into the bunk-house. That is all. I thought you might understand it. I was going to ask the people here. It seems almost like a dream."

"I think if I was you," said the boy quietly, "that I'd call it a dream."

She looked at him wonderingly, deeply

perplexed for the instant, then after a moment's thought replied: "I dare say I dreamed. I dreamed, also, the other day when I was with you in the Winters' camp. This is a country for dreams, — and for dreamers like me."

CHAPTER X.

A NAMELESS GIRL WITH A MEMORY.

JERRY remained to breakfast with Marjie, and far into the forenoon. When he finally said that he must be going back as His Highness would be expecting him, the girl ran outside, and returning soon, remarked: "George is getting my horse so that I may go with you as far as the Winters' new ranch. You don't object, do you, Jerry?"

"No," answered the boy, "it isn't exactly on my road, but I'll be glad to go along with you, and show you the place." Then he added, turning to the woman, Lil: — "I don't want to forget this time that His Highness wants some papers, if you've got any."

"Does he prefer them baked or

boiled?" asked Marjie slyly, as the woman searched about the room.

"He ain't very particular," answered the boy, smiling at the reminiscence.

"You see I remembered," laughed the girl. "So I packed up an assortment, from a Sunday-school tract to a New York Sunday newspaper, including a lot of good magazines. Such a lot that Jim casually inquired as he tied the bundle to his saddle, if I hadn't better take a pack horse along. That was very unkind, so I didn't tell him what the package contained. I will go and get it, and if you like your partner as well as I think you do, you will manage to take them to him."

"You're good," said the boy, as Marjie, laden with a large package, returned. "Ike'll be terrible glad to get all this. He ain't used to havin' anything like this done for him."

"My goodness!" exclaimed the woman, as she handed him a newspaper, "I guess all that ought to last him about a year!"

"A year is a long time," said Marjie. "Tell him that I will have many such packages for him in that length of time, and feel pleased to put to such good use what to me is valueless."

"He'd thank you himself if he had the chance, but he don't go anywhere much."

"No, Jerry's right," affirmed the woman. "His Highness is mighty quiet. Ain't been down here sence, — let's see, — long before he turned out the boys, — I mean," she added hastily as Jerry's eyes flashed angrily at her, "sence the men moved the sheep down to the summer range. Yes, he's awful fond of stickin' at home. I never did see his beat. He'll be a regular hermit before long! Now it wouldn't hurt him a bit, — I mean it would be a good thing for him to get out and see folks once in a while. Land sakes! I don't go out much, myself, but if I didn't have anyone to talk to, I don't know what'd ever become of me!"

"Well, I must be movin'," said Jerry

nervously, taking the package and starting away. There was no telling what the woman might say if permitted to talk longer in that strain. The girl followed him quietly, a faint trace of merriment showing in her dark eyes. At the corral, George Howell helped her to mount, while Jerry fastened the heavy bundle securely to the back of his saddle.

"That pony of yours is very pretty. What do you call it?" Marjie asked the boy.

"Just 'Lady,'" he answered, then continued proudly; — "she *is* pretty all right. Such an even color all over. At night you can't see her at all unless you're close up to her. An' she's quick as a flash of lightning. She's trained to do tricks, too. Want to see her lay down? Here, Lady, *down!*" he said, going to her head and gently lowering it with both hands. The pony obeyed with well-trained quickness and grace, to the great wonderment of Marjie.

"How proud you must be to own it!" she exclaimed. "I should think you'd

be afraid that someone would run away with it."

"It wouldn't be healthy for anyone to try it! Lady knows just as much as anyone does, an' she'd find her way back home if they took her most anywheres. She'll stay anywhere I put her, but if anyone else was to try it she'd bite a rope in two in a minute, an' start on the dead run for home. No, I ain't much afraid about losin' her."

"By the way, Jerry," said George Howell, as they were about to ride away, "I'd like to have you come over early to-morrow and go on an errand for me. It's over on Milk River, and I can't very well go myself as I have to ride over to the other side of the mountains. Come as early as you can, so's to get an early start, for it'll take you a good two days. I'll give you a better horse, and you can turn Lady out in the field here."

"All right," responded Jerry, as they rode away.

"My, but you will have a long ride! Though I am glad that Lady is not to

go," said the girl, admiring the easy, graceful gait of the small pony. "I'd love to ride her. Would you care if I tried her for a short distance to-morrow?"

"Well, she ain't never been ridden by a lady, but she's got a heap of sense, an' mebbe if you're real gentle with her she'd be all right. But I'm kind of afraid. Hold on a minute," he said, dismounting. "Just get on her now an' try her for a ways, then she'll know it's all right. I'm afraid for you to start out by yourself."

"I've never tried a man's saddle," she laughed. "But of course it's the proper way to ride. If I like it, I will give my saddle to little Taggie, down here."

Jerry stood at the pony's head while Marjie mounted, then the gentle Lady, after glancing behind to make sure of her burden, started off on an easy canter with the utmost pride. Jerry followed, leading Marjie's large saddle animal, then, perceiving that she was fast out-

distancing him, he climbed up into the girl's saddle and soon overtook her. She drew up the gray pony as he rode beside her, and laughed heartily at his appearance. When they came in sight of the Winters' white tent and covered wagons, Jerry asked her if she wished to change horses.

"No, I like this, and I'd rather not change; — that is, if you don't care."

He assured her that he did not in the least, yet when they stopped before the tent and young Taggie's eyes laughed merrily out at him, he flushed until his brow was the same deep red as his cheeks.

"How do you do?" said the girl, coming shyly out of the tent. "There ain't anyone to home."

"Why, you're the one we came to see. Didn't we, Jerry?" exclaimed Marjie. "And if you don't object, we'll get down and stay for a few minutes."

"I'm not caring," she answered in a tone meant to be polite.

"There, Jerry, I felt sure that I would like a man's saddle the best. It's simply fine! Have you a saddle, Taggie?"

"No, nor a horse, neither," spoke Taggie, sharply.

"Oh!" Marjie's tone was sorrowful. "I've been planning on lots of great horseback rides with you. But we can fix that! Here's a saddle that I want to get rid of, and down at my sister's is a horse, — Sour Beans. Such a *nice* horse for a *beginner*. It's perfectly gentle, and no one ever uses it. I learned to ride on it." She sighed slightly at the remembrance. "After you learn to ride well, we will manage to find another horse for you and you can give Sour Beans to one of your sisters. Oh, don't thank me! It's pure selfishness on my part. I want you to ride with me."

"We'll just have a circus!" exclaimed Taggie, nodding her curly head. "I can never have any fun with Ice, Snow, or Frost! If I go anywheres with them, they just hold up their heads and say,

'Taggie, Taggie'; just like this." The girl screwed up her face in a ridiculous imitation of her sisters. Marjie laughed at the quaint little creature, then asked, as she followed her into the tent:

"Why is it that they didn't give you a freezing name, too? Is it because you were so sunny that you thawed it?"

"I ain't got any name," answered the young girl confidentially. "It was like this: Ma and Pa never could agree on a name for me. Pa wanted a name to go with the other girls', but Ma said it was scandalous, an' said that she wouldn't have any more such nonsense, that if he couldn't give up the idea an' name me something respectable, that I'd just go without a name to the longest day of my life. That's how it is that I haven't a name. The girls used to holler 'taggie' after me when I'd go to tag 'em around, an' somehow they all got to callin' me that, bein' as they had to call me something. I named myself Gladys Maud a long time ago, but I don't claim it now because I don't like it so well any more.

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I think Marjie is the prettiest name that I ever heard."

"That's because it's *her* name," spoke up Jerry for the first time. "It sounds to me like the name of a queen or an angel. But for a girl's name, I like Taggie as well as anything."

"Wait," said Marjie, after several moments' conversation, "I've got something in the pocket of my saddle for you, Taggie."

When the tent had closed behind her, the young girl leaned forward and spoke in a low voice to Jerry. "Did you ever play with a little girl in the woods behind an old log house, an' give her a candy heart?"

His face flushed with earnestness as he answered, "Yes, I've never forgot it! You're good to remember it. And the candy heart — I suppose you ate it up long ago?"

"No — I'm — not very fond of candy."

"Now, that's too bad," exclaimed Marjie, entering the tent, "for that's just what I've brought to you."

"I didn't mean all kinds," said poor Taggie, conscience stricken. "I only meant one kind in particular!"—and Jerry treasured the girl's artless confession with a feeling akin to awe.

CHAPTER XI.

IT WAS ALL LADY'S FAULT.

THAT next morning Jerry came early, so very early, that Marjie, though rising before her usual hour, failed to see him when he started on the errand for George Howell. Not long after they had breakfasted, Howell left, also, going in an opposite direction to a point across the mountains. So Marjie and the woman were left alone. It was a puzzle to Marjie where the woman found so much to talk about, though in truth it was mostly idle chatter with just enough of interest thrown in to make it bearable; yet if the girl tired of it, her looks did not betray the fact. In the late afternoon when the day began to grow somewhat cooler, she caught up Jerry's pony which he had left in the pasture, and the

woman helped her to saddle it. She started out with the intention of riding over to her new friends, the Winters, but the cool green of the mountains proved too enticing to be resisted, so she rode toward them, past the old log cabin, then on up into the shade of the cool timbered gulch, thinking or caring little about the direction in which she went, satiated, as it were, by the glories of the time and place. "You know this country better than I do, little Lady," she said aloud to the pony, "and it's so grandly beautiful here that I don't care where we go, so we will keep on until we get tired, and then we'll turn around and go back the way we came. The evenings of June are long in this northern country, so we have all the time we want; then if we get lost, all we have to do is to climb to the top of one of these high hills and scan the country."

If Marjie had been more familiar with the ways of horses she would have perceived that the pony had quickened its gait and was taking her with careless

eagerness over the trail it had ofttimes trod, — the trail to its home. But the girl thought of nothing but the delightful gliding gait of the small creature, the invigorating mountain air, and the wonderful variety of beautiful scenery. On they went, over the dim trail through the timber which led up the steep, rugged side of the gulch, then down into a winding, brush-covered coulee; on and on, up a narrow, winding trail that was deeply worn by the hoofs of the animals that had trodden it for ages. First the buffalo, then the Indian ponies; now the range cattle and the horses of the outlaws.

They came at last to a great, perpendicular ridge of rock which loomed directly before them. It seemed to Marjie that the gulch ended there, but to her surprise the pony kept up its fast gait, turning to the left, and following up through a little stream that flowed close to the foot of the rock. Again the pony turned, and entered a narrow opening of rock through which gushed the small

creek, hissing and bubbling like a miniature cataract.

At the sight of the sweet, fresh beauty of the small valley stretched out before her gaze, Marjie held her breath in wonderment. She wanted to stay there forever and feast on the scene before her, but the pony thought differently, and the girl's urgent, "Whoa, Lady," had no apparent effect. It suddenly occurred to Marjie's sense of reason or intuition that the pony was heading for its home, and that this was its home. For the moment she was dumbfounded, then laughed a little uncomfortably to herself.

"If only Jerry were here, I wouldn't mind. But imagine riding up to a strange man's camp in this fashion! Whoa, Lady! Good Lady! Whoa! We will go back the way we came! Whatever ails the horse!"

Marjie's hand was strong upon the bridle, but it only resulted in the wilful pony's prancing about in a circle and standing like a circus horse upon its hind feet. There was no alternative but to go

on. Perhaps, after all, this was not the place. Vain hope! She passed through the screen of bushes quickly, bending low in the saddle to prevent the branches from striking her face. As it was, her hat was brushed off, her hair tumbled about her face, and before she could recover her breath, the pony stopped suddenly in front of a low log cabin.

A bronzed man loomed up before her, looking, if anything, more surprised and bewildered than the disheveled girl. He had been in the act of drawing a gun from his belt. His hand still rested upon its stock. The girl was first to recover. Her words came in jerks. "Well,— you — don't need to shoot!"

"I beg your pardon. I have no such intention," were the words spoken in courtly fashion, and by a man whose voice was deep, rich, and musical.

"But you did have! Is it customary for people in this part of the country to receive — a — callers in that fashion? Not that I intended to make the first call, — that was Lady's fault! I don't see

how I ever got here! I suppose you are His Highness? If you don't mind, I'd like to have a drink of water, and I'd like to get down and fix my hair and go back after my hat. It's somewhere there in the brush. I don't suppose that I'll ever be able to turn this obstinate creature around. It's all her fault! I couldn't budge her!"

"Certainly, get down, if you wish. You are the — Margaret, are you not, Miss ———?" said the man.

"Drop the Miss, if you please. It's a trifle out of place alongside of that!" pointing to the six-shooter in his belt. "My name is Margaret Navarre, and you are Ike. I know all about you. — You are Jerry's friend." She stood on the ground beside him, her rare, fantastic beauty at its height. There was always a touch of barbarism about her. Now a certain excitement caused her strange, wild spirit to show in her eyes, and it was emphasized by her disheveled hair and brilliant coloring. Until now her life had been as quiet and peaceful as the

merest babe's. This was the change. As she looked at Ike she knew that she stood in the presence of some great and startling mystery; a problem not yet solved, of which she felt herself to be a part and in it.

Something of this came to the man as he watched her braid together the long, waving strands of hair, and caught the sparkle of dark eyes and the gleam of white teeth. Somewhere, deep in his conscience, he felt a fear. The sight of so much beauty was enough to make a man fear; but this man was unselfish.

He went inside the house and brought to her a cup of water. She took it gratefully. As she drank, he placed a box beside her and asked her to be seated. It was evident that he did not wish her to go inside the house. It was as well, she thought. What a strange man he was; grim and silent, and yes, — ugly, — decidedly ugly. A black beard covered the lower part of his face; as for the remainder, the features were good, but the dark eyes looked stern and moody.

It was an attractive but not a pleasant face, and still the girl felt no fear.

She seated herself upon the box that he had brought from the cabin, a trifle dazed, perhaps. She saw the man turn about and without a word disappear in the bushes. She had a moment or two to wonder at his action, then he reappeared, bringing her hat.

"Here is your hat," he said quietly, as he handed it to her. "I fear Lady has been rather rude to you."

"It's all my own fault," answered Marjie. "I ought to have known that the horse was going straight home; but it never occurred to me until we were inside here, then I couldn't turn her back. I wish Jerry were here!"

"I wish so, myself," said the man coolly. His tone implied more than the words, but Marjie ignored it, saying: — "You must get terribly lonesome up here when he is away. Are you all alone?"

"I have the pleasure of *your* company, just now."

"Oh, I am greatly complimented! I wasn't at all certain before that it was a pleasure to you. I feel very much relieved!"

He noted the sarcasm of her words and replied: "I shouldn't like to have you feel uncomfortable while you are here. Just as soon as you want to go, I will see that Lady starts out with you. She will take you back promptly."

Marjie leaned her elbow on her knee, resting her chin in the hollow of her hand. She looked up at him with an expression half quizzical, half amused. Here was a master mind, and she revelled in the realization; yet she would not capitulate. "Do you know that you are very rude to me, after riding all this way to find you?" she suggested archly. "You are anxious to have me go away. Well, I will return rudeness with rudeness. I am not ready to go back just this minute, and I am not going."

It is to be regretted that Marjie pouted.

The man's expression changed. He procured a box for himself, such as he

had given Marjie, and seated himself opposite her. When he spoke again, his voice was friendly and low, attuned to tears that would not come: "Do you know you are the first girl that I have talked with in ten years? If I have been uncivil to you, pardon me. You must not blame one so far outside the pale of — your world, — yourself. Those magazines that you sent me were a god-send. You, yourself, have come like a ray of sunlight into a darkened dungeon. In my heart I am not so unkind. Will you believe me?"

"Yes, — I believe you," answered the girl, as though bewildered, "but I don't understand you. Surely I must be very stupid. There are so many things around here, lately, that I do not understand. Do you ever have dreams?"

"Dreams? Yes," said the man, "nightmares! Why?"

"Because, when I see things that I can't understand, I call them dreams. I have had several dreams, and this is one. But I never tell my dreams."

He looked at her curiously. "When your dreams have been made clear to you, — what then?"

"Then I will have become a dream."

"You are a queer girl," mused the man, as clasping his hands together and resting his arms upon his knees, he leaned forward, studying her face.

"Yes; but you understand me. That is, you understand what I am talking about, — and I don't. I am groping about in the dark, but there is always a light, you know, and I am going to find it."

"I think," he said slowly, as a look of comprehension flashed across his brow, "that you've got things mixed. You are in the light and what you are trying to grope for is darkness. When you find it, keep out of it; as you love those who love you, keep out of it."

A slight shiver passed over her. She rose to her feet. All at once she seemed to have grown older and taller. She felt that her view, her very soul, had expanded. Then with a sigh, she said:

"I never thought of that before. Thank you for telling me. I understand, — a little. I must go back now. You don't think it rude of me to come here like this, even though I couldn't help it, — do you?" As though suddenly aroused, she concluded: "It doesn't really matter what you think, though." Then turning to the pony, "Ah, Lady, you played us a fine trick!"

His Highness led the pony to the opening of rocks, then placing the bridle reins in Marjie's hands, said: "Don't worry about finding your way home. Lady understands that she is to take you there, and I know that you will reach it safely, else I should accompany you."

"Thank you," she answered; then, reaching out her hand to the man, said simply: "I think, after all, that I like you. You have been honest with me. Will you, — do you care to be friends?"

"No," he answered, stepping back from the outstretched hand. "No, I thank you."

She still held her hand out to him, astonished by what he had said. Then like a flash it went to her side, a strange look crossed her face, and she said almost inaudibly as she moved away, "As you like!"

CHAPTER XII.

A REVELATION OF A DARK SHADE.

GEORGE Howell returned late that night, and again Marjie heard men's voices outside the house, and from the small window watched a light in the bunk-house. She had returned from her ride before dark, and pleading weariness to the woman, had retired at once. There was no desire for sleep, so alive were her thoughts, yet in an incredibly short time she was in the embrace of youth's sweet slumber. Since that first night she had kept the window open, so now the sounds came plainly, waking her without a start or a thought of surprise.

"You are groping for the darkness. When you find it, keep out of it."

The words which the man had spoken repeated themselves many times in her

mind. She understood the import of them, although she was ignorant of their full meaning. Who was this man that had so strongly advised her? Was he robber, villain, or murderer, that he hid from the sight of people and feared the approach of a stranger? Or had some great sorrow or trouble driven him there, away from the haunts of men? And this "darkness"?—She knew that he had meant badness as though he had used the word.

"When you find it, keep out of it."

It had sounded like a command from the lips of one whose every utterance had a value. But how was she to keep out of it when she was already in it? When she had thrown her life among people whose actions were not to be questioned? What were they, robbers or highwaymen? She thought the days of highwaymen were a matter of past history. Then it could not be that. Train-robbers, perhaps, or even ordinary thieves. And this man, His Highness, must be the

leader. But what of George Howell and of these men who came around his house in the night time, of whom no word was spoken? It must be, she argued to herself, that, living as he did so near them, and so far out of civilization, he was obliged to be on friendly terms with them to protect himself. Her thoughts there in the darkness of her room were live things, and the man's words kept repeating themselves to her. Surely he did not think that she, a girl, would have any desire to become one of them! No, certainly, he could not have meant that. What, then? Why, how stupid she had been! He meant, of course, that she was to keep out of it, — to know nothing, see nothing, and to remember nothing. Then the sharp report of a gun broke the stillness, and also the even chain of her thoughts. She quivered a moment from the start it gave her, then she rose and hurriedly dressed. She had no desire for more sleep that night.

Not long afterward, a low knock sounded on her door. It startled her

more than the shot had done, but she answered directly and clearly, "What is it?"

"I was afraid that the shot might have woke you up and frightened you, so I thought I'd come and tell you that some men are stopping in the bunk-house and one of their guns went off by accident. I'm sorry that you've been disturbed!"

It was George Howell. There was a sound of tender concern in his voice, which touched and warmed the nervous, lonely girl. She walked over to the door that he might hear more plainly while she spoke. As she crossed the uncarpeted floor he heard the sound of her shoes.

"Why, you're dressed!" he exclaimed, quickly.

"Yes," answered Marjie. "It did make me a little nervous, and I went to bed so early that I've had my sleep out, so I thought that I might as well get up and dress."

"Come out," said Howell. "I was

just going to hunt for something to eat. Aren't you hungry?"

Marjie came into the large living-room. The man set down the lamp that he had been holding and turned to look at her.

"I'm not hungry," she said, "but perhaps I will be if I watch you eat. Didn't you have your supper? Where is Mrs. Howell, — Lil?"

He pointed to an adjoining room. "There, asleep."

"It seems strange," said the girl wonderingly, "that the shot did not waken her, or that our talking does not."

"Oh, she's a pretty heavy sleeper, — sometimes," said George Howell, in a peculiar tone of voice.

Marjie did not answer, and silence fell for a time. Then through the half-open door of the bedroom, came the sound of heavy breathing, intermixed with snoring. Again the girl wished that Jerry were there, but this time she did not put her thoughts into words. How could the woman sleep so? Then

upon the close air of the room came the unmistakable odor of whiskey. Had the man been drinking, or, — could it be possible that the woman, — bah! The girl's face reddened suddenly. A feeling that she must get away and out into the air, or she would strangle, overpowered her. She went to the door and opened it wide, standing there with the light of the new moon shining faintly upon her head.

What sort of a den was this that she had entered in all innocence? She would leave it at once and go back to her sweet sister, away from this terrible dream that disturbed her sleep and filled her waking hours with perplexity.

His Highness had been right. Yes, she would keep out of it and *get* out of it. It would seem an endless time to her before daybreak. If she could only start out now! Oh, the infamy, the lowness, the wretchedness of it all!

She turned suddenly and faced the man who had drawn near. The look in her

face, the flash of her eyes cowed him. He became as white as herself.

"Tell me what ails her!" she demanded, pointing with outstretched arm toward the room where the woman slept.

Howell moved back a step, but did not speak. She drew nearer to him, still pointing.

"Why don't you speak? Why haven't you an answer ready for me? You are a coward! Yes, worse, to bring a girl to a hole like this, — to such a life! Stand aside! I will see for myself, since you are afraid to speak!" So great was the passion condensed within her heart that her whole body quivered with it, but her voice was clear.

It seemed hours to the man before she came out of the room, though it was in reality but a very few seconds. She walked past him, out into the night.

"Where are you going?" asked the man in alarm, quickly following her.

"Out into the air where I can breathe! To wait for daylight so that I can go away!"

He caught her, almost fiercely, by the arm.

"In God's name, girl, wait! Don't leave like this! Don't feel so about it! Let me explain. I never dreamed that she would do this while you were here, or that you would know anything about it. It shames me more than I can tell you, for I am all to blame. I should never have had you come here; Tom would never have allowed it if he'd known, but he don't. We've never been together much, and somehow, I've always kept it from him. Listen, — you will try to forgive me, to think better of me when I've told you, — when I've made you understand. If you could know the life I've led, year after year, — if you could know it all, you wouldn't wonder that when I saw you in all your girlish sweetness I longed to have you near me. Why shouldn't I have you for a sister, as Tom did? — I, who have only curses for my lot? So I thought you'd never know the worst of things here. But I know that you are different, — better, that you

never dreamed of such degradation. I alone am to blame, but I swear I thought to keep the thing from you. Try to forgive me, — to forget my miserable existence! I wanted you so, little girl, little — sister!"

His voice broke. A quivering came over the girl's face. She turned to him, a sob coming with her breath.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, so sorry! I never knew, — I never thought! Forgive me for my anger and my hasty words! I never realized that such wretchedness existed here, — that you suffered such a miserable life! I have been selfish, thinking only of myself. I'm so sorry for it all! If you care to have me stay longer after what I have said, then I *will* stay."

"If I care!" pleaded Howell.

"Then come to the kitchen and we will make a hunt for something to eat. After all," said Marjie as she led the way, "there is much forgetfulness in eating. To-morrow *this* will be a dream."

CHAPTER XIII.

BACK TO THE DREAM SCENES AGAIN.

ODDLY enough, before realizing it herself, Marjie became used to it all. The people were good-natured, kind to her, and she told herself that their morals were their own affairs. George Howell had never referred to that night's scene, and so far as the girl's actions were concerned, she might have, in all truth, forgotten the whole circumstance. But the man, who had seen a revelation in her passion, knew better.

He had taken the surest, quickest way to Marjie's affection when he touched her compassion, — the most responsive part of her nature.

Howell possessed a rare way of hiding all his weak points and bringing out into

notice only the best part of himself. In time Marjie grew to love him, even better than she did Tom, simply because he needed the love. She remained in the mountains two days longer, then returned to the prairie, and to Kitty and the babies.

As the early summer passed by, and July came with its hot winds, she grew daily more restless, taking long rides by herself far away from the ranch. Her sister was making preparations to go to Salt Lake. Tom had some business which would take him there, and as Kitty was in delicate health, he concluded that it would be best to take her with him. He would procure a nurse, take a run back to the ranch and look after things a bit, then return to Salt Lake and remain there until Fall. It was the city of Kitty's early youth, where many of her girlhood friends resided. Marjie had been taken away from there by her father's sister when she was so young a child that no memory of the place or the people remained. She could go there

with Kitty and the babies, or stay in the mountains until their return.

She scarcely hesitated in her choice, nor did a single misgiving come to her, or a foreboding that she had chosen unwisely. She would go to the mountains.

When the time came, and she had said good-by to Kitty and Tom and the babies, and started off alone toward the mountains, she felt like an imprisoned soul set free. For the time she was mad for the heights, the mysteries, and the uncertainties of the untried darkness. Her soul sang a wild song that day. The red ribbon wound with abandon about the broad-brimmed hat was not redder than her cheeks. Her coloring was gorgeous. Upon her wonderfully changing face, where every feeling showed itself, the deep, steady red was but the reflection of the fire that burned within. But she did not stop, nor try, nor care to analyze herself.

She did not know, and knowing would not have cared, that to the people who came out to meet her as she rode up to

the ranch-house in the mountains, she appeared too gorgeously beautiful to be real. George Howell scarcely spoke as he took her horse, but Jerry came up and welcomed her warmly, and Taggie, who happened to be there on an errand, threw her arms about her neck and kissed her many times. To her, Marjie was a beautiful reality.

It was fortunate that Mrs. Howell did not try to embrace her, for Marjie drew back unconsciously at the mere touch of her hand. Kisses were somewhat out of the woman's experience, but she made up for that, and for everything else, by her profuse use of words. As Taggie's mother had remarked, after she first met her: "She's the out-talkinest woman that ever lived. She'll talk till she's black in the face!"

She did not talk this time until she reached that condition, for Taggie, forgetful of manners, was laughing and chatting in her quaint way, regardless of the immense woman behind her who had launched out in a long-winded recital.

The young girl had long since forgotten her bashfulness.

"That new horse, Dandy, is fine. Its name just suits it. See, I rode Sour Beans this time to save my Dandy. I can stand him all right for short distances. Oh, I am so glad! And you are going to stay all summer long! I was here when your things come yesterday,—Jerry and me,—and I just jumped right up in the air and hollered, an' Jerry threw his hat up so high that he came near never finding it again in the weeds. We found out that you'd be here to-day, so that's how I managed to be here. I'd 'a' broke my neck to 'a' got here, but Ma sent me after some flaxseed. You see, Frost got a big sliver in her hand, an' she's been making the awfulest fuss about it! So I looked real serious last night, and said I was terrible worried about it, because such a thing as blood-poisoning *might* happen from such a thing, an' it was sure death. I knew Ma was out of flaxseed, but she'd forgot, an' spoke up real quick, 'You must put a flaxseed poultice on that

this very minute, Frostie!' 'Yes,' said Frost, 'but there ain't no flaxseed!' Then Ma says to me, 'You ride right over to Howell's an' borrow some.' 'But,' says I, 'Ma, I've just been there an' it's dark now, an' I ain't exactly afraid of the dark, but you don't want your little girl to ride around this strange country, after night time, do you? What if I'd run onto an outlaw, or a horsethief? What then?' That'll bring Ma every time. So she said I should go the first thing in the morning. But I kept hanging around an' puttin' it off till I thought it was most time for you to be comin' along, then I hurried up an' come after the flaxseed. So you see, that's how it is!"

"Well, I am glad and happy that I am here; glad and happy!" said Marjie as she entered the cool ranch-house.

CHAPTER XIV.

WHAT DID MARJIE KNOW ABOUT HIS DISPOSITION?

IT was noon before the artful Taggie departed with the flaxseed. Marjie, at last remembering the girl's errand, turned to her from the trunk which she was unpacking and remarked: —

"Aren't you afraid that blood-poisoning will really set in, or that Frost will worry herself to death while waiting for that flaxseed?"

"I guess she can find the way down here if it's that bad," answered Taggie heartlessly. "No, I ain't much afraid, but I'd forgot all about what I come for. I suppose, though, I'd better be going back or Mrs. Howell'll be givin' me an invite for dinner. I can smell it, an' I'm mighty hungry!"

"You'd better stop thinking and make a start instead," advised Marjie. "Of course you know that I'd perfectly love to have you stay all day, only I am afraid that the wrath of your parents will affect me as well as yourself. I want to be on the good side of them because I expect to wheedle them out of your company a great deal of the time this summer. Then, too, I am really sorry for Frost, and I think you are a very bad girl. Now really, couldn't you have managed to come to-day without working the thing on those lines? You know the imagination is a great factor in any sickness or trouble. You shouldn't have done it. Now, she might imagine that she had blood-poisoning to such an extent that the suffering and effect would be as great as though she really did have it. Scientists say that a person may actually die through the mere belief that they are suffering some fatal illness."

A mischievous light shone in Marjie's eyes as she made this impressive assertion, but the younger girl did not see it. She

rose to her feet, looking rather frightened and uncomfortable, and said: "I guess I'd better be going back. Say, I'm kind of sorry that I done it that way; but I never thought about the imagination before. You don't suppose, really, that it'll make any difference, do you?—That she'll get any worse?"

"I couldn't tell, of course," answered Marjie, as she went out of the room with Taggie; "but you don't want her to feel uncomfortable, do you? Of course I know you don't, but you are thoughtless, like myself. I think thoughtlessness is the greatest fault that most people have to fight against, and it is the most difficult to overcome. At least, I have found it that way. One's memory is so apt to be faulty in little things, and then we are all so selfish."

"You talk like a missionary woman I heard once down in Idaho. She used to preach on the reservation, and sometimes she'd preach to the white folks around there. You ought to be a preacher!"

"Me,—a preacher!" exclaimed Mar-

jie, as she stood at the head of the old horse while Taggie climbed into the saddle. "I am afraid that you haven't been to many 'preachings,' little Taggie. But as for me being a missionary or any thing of that sort, — why, I am not good enough! Though it is true that we all ought to be missionaries in our own little way. Here comes Jerry with his pony. He probably wants to ride home with you."

"Mercy, no!" exclaimed Taggie. "If Pa caught me ridin' with him he wouldn't let me go out again for a month of Sundays!"

"Is your father prejudiced against young men, or just this one in particular?"

"Oh, Jerry ain't a young man. He's just a boy. An' Pa's kind of funny, that's all."

"Hello, goin' home now?" questioned Jerry, riding up to them. Taggie nodded her head in reply, then with a brief good-by to Marjie, she gave the old horse a lash with her quirt, causing Sour

Beans to start off on a somewhat livelier gait than usual. "I'm goin', too," remarked the boy to Marjie. "I ought to 'a' gone a long time ago. Ike ain't feelin' well."

"Oh, I have some books and papers for him. Will you take them up there with you? I will get them now. They are all fastened up in one package and you can carry them easily on your saddle."

Jerry led the pony up to the door while Marjie went into the house for the package. She brought it out to him and watched him as he fastened it to his saddle.

"Did you say that your friend was not well?" she asked, with a sudden remembrance of what he had said.

"Yes; he stayed up at the Find until long after dark last night, an' when he come in he didn't eat no supper, an' went right to bed, saying that he didn't feel very well. He hadn't got up when I left this morning, so I don't know how he is to-day. Ike works too hard. He looked like a ghost when he come in

last night. He ain't never been sick, though, that I know of, but I've been feelin' kind of anxious about him all the morning, as though I'd ought to be at home."

"Here's luck to you," said the girl, waving her hand to him as he rode away. "When you get home you will find your friend well,—and as *pleasant* as usual." This last was added in a low tone.

Howell, who had come to tell her that dinner was ready, laughed slightly, as he asked:

"And what do you know about his friend's disposition, little Marjie?"

Marjie was not little. It must have been her youthfulness that impressed people in that manner. She turned quickly and looked at the man to learn if he had any suspicion that she knew from personal observation. He noticed nothing but the deep color of her lips and cheeks, and the brightness of her eyes. She answered quickly:

"I know very little about this man, — his friend, — but I am under the impres-

sion that he is an imbittered, sour, cynical man, — *old* and disagreeable. Am I right? Don't you ever conceive impressions of people whom you have never — met?"

"Yes, I suppose I do; but somehow I thought you must have seen him when you spoke like that."

"Are my impressions so near right, then?" questioned Marjie, watching him closely. She could not tell how much he knew. His Highness might have told someone of her visit there. Why should he not have done so? Yet with the thought came the certain conviction that he had not done so. When Howell spoke again, she knew for a certainty that her visit to the camp was a secret between that strange man and herself.

"You're right in some respects," he answered. "He ain't always the pleasantest man in the world. Rather set in his ways. But he ain't exactly an old man, — not exactly. In fact, I can remember when he was almost a beardless boy. But he's got a bad reputation, and

he isn't the kind of a man that you would care to meet."

"No, I never care to meet him;—decidedly not! But what is he, or what has he done to deserve a bad reputation?"

"Well, he's supposed to be an enemy of the law,—a fugitive. In this country we call them outlaws. I say he's supposed to be, but there's no man would want to get up in court and swear to it. And, of course, you know that what I tell you is in strict confidence."

"Then there is a doubt;—you are not sure that the man is an outlaw?"

The girl was following him too closely. He would rather she had accepted what he told her without a question, taking his first assertion as conclusive truth, and think no more of the matter, or of the man.

"No one is ever sure of anything," he said shortly. "I've been sent to tell you that dinner is on the table. I suppose you're ready for it after your long ride. You don't know how glad I am to have you here, my little Mar—, little sister.

I want you to have a good time all the while. You can ride horseback any time you want to, and I'll keep up a horse for you in the small pasture so you can get it whenever you want to go, without any trouble. I want you to feel that this is your own home, and that you can have what you want, and go where you want to."

"You are very kind," said Marjie. "You need not fear but that I will do as I like, for that is my nature, and I know that I will have one long, happy time."

CHAPTER XV.

THE WORK OF A COWARD.

THAT evening Marjie, whom nothing really tired, caught up her horse and started up the road to see if Taggie had indeed worked any bad results by playing upon her sister's imagination. She had gone perhaps half a mile to where the road leading to the Winters' new ranch branched off from the main trail, when she saw in the distance ahead of her, Jerry's gray Lady coming at break-neck speed, the horse and rider just visible through a cloud of dust which the little animal's hoofs raised.

Marjie waited at the side of the road, and when Jerry saw her, he reined up suddenly and came toward her.

"You must be practicing for a pony race," greeted the girl, but she saw the

trouble in his face before she had finished the sentence. "Why, what's the matter, Jerry?"

His face looked drawn and haggard, years older than when she had seen him a few hours before.

"I'm afraid Ike's dying!" The words came like a sob between his tightly compressed lips.

"No, no!" exclaimed Marjie. "Not that! Tell me about it!"

Jerry's face was filled with grief, which Marjie's sympathy seemed to aggravate. His mouth quivered as he spoke:

"When I got back this noon, he was a-lying there in bed just as he was early in the morning. He raised up his head and looked at me when I come in, and asked for a drink of water. Well, he drank like he never seen water before. Then I cooked something for him, an' tried to get him to eat, but he wouldn't touch a thing, and kind o' talked queer all the time. Then I cooked supper, an' he wouldn't eat any of that. When

I brought it to him he sat up in bed and told me to bring his gun so's he could kill someone. He talked terrible wild for a spell, and then he fell back on his bunk like he was dead, an' I couldn't get a word out of him. He was just a-breathing hard all the time. He didn't know me or anything, so I didn't know what to do. Then I thought I'd come down here, an' mebbe someone would know something to do for him. I can't let him die like that! I hid all the guns an' knives, an' everything, so's if he woke up before I got back he wouldn't hurt himself."

"He must have the fever!" exclaimed Marjie with the greatest sympathy. "Perhaps he has the mountain fever. My aunt had it once when we visited the Rocky Mountains. I know just what to do for it. Get some of this white sage that grows in the deep grass. Not this common kind, — and make a tea out of it. It's not this large, common sage, you know, but something else; perhaps it is not sage at all, but it looks

like it. I know it perfectly. Come, we will find some. We were near the Indian mission, and the Indians were very kind to us. I am sure they saved my aunt's life. See, here is some of the sage now. This is the plant."

The girl got down from her horse, and among the dense grass of the hillside, found the silvery sage. Jerry was beside her in an instant, and in a short time they had gathered a large bunch of the weed.

"If I only knew how to make the tea, now, and give it to him," said the boy. "I hate to be gone so long, — there's no tellin' — he might be dead, you know, when I get back. I thought mebbe George Howell would come up there an' see him, though they ain't been on good terms for a while. If Lil could ride a horse, mebbe she'd come. I don't know what to do!"

The girl was binding up the bunch of sage with her handkerchief. She spoke quickly: —

"But Lil can't ride a horse; — you

know it. And if your friend is delirious it would be worse than folly to bring a man there whom he possibly dislikes. You have no time to lose. I will go back with you myself. Perhaps two heads will be better than one."

"Oh, I can't let you go there, — I can't! Ike would never forgive me! You see, — oh, I can't tell you! I can't!"

Marjie placed her hand upon the boy's shoulder. Her voice was soft and full of sweetness.

"You don't need to tell me anything, Jerry. I've been there before."

His eyes opened wide as he looked at her in astonishment.

"Yes," she continued, as she quickly mounted her horse, "I've met His Highness. There can be no great objection to my going there again, can there? It is not so strange, Jerry. Come, I know the way perfectly. See, I can lead you up to the old cabin and on to the very trail that you travel so often. It was Lady that showed me. You remember

the time you let me ride her when you went away on that errand? That was it. But I never realized that she was taking me there until we were right there in the place."

The last part of this was spoken while the two were going rapidly up the road. Jerry could scarcely realize what the girl had told him, but he knew that it would be useless to remonstrate, that she would have carried her point if a dozen Jerries had been there to interfere.

It began to dawn in his mind that he was glad that things had turned out in that way, — that she should be the one to go to Ike. Then, soon, it all seemed natural. Marjie's composure gave him confidence. He quite believed, for the time, that she could save his friend; he could not see how her presence near any dying man could effect otherwise.

On she went before him, for they had passed the old cabin, and the narrow trail would not permit the two to ride abreast. She carried the bunch of weed in one hand, and once she turned about

in the saddle and waved it at the boy who was following close behind. Then it seemed to him that he had gone on a fool's errand, that Ike was not sick, and that the whole afternoon had been a nightmare.

All at once the bay horse stopped suddenly and refused to go on in the strange trail faster than a walk; so Jerry rode on ahead, and after that Marjie's horse did not hesitate to travel as rapidly as its small gray guide.

It seemed a wonderful race up the gulch. In the conscience of the gray pony lay the knowledge that the man who had raised and trained her was in danger. Whether Lady communicated this same thought to the bay, or whether its pride refused to allow the small pony to get away from it, cannot be known. However it was, Marjie's horse kept close behind Lady, and the two horses entered the Retreat together.

Jerry took both the horses and fastened them some distance away from the cabin, then the two went into the house. A

slight shiver passed over Marjie, but she laid her hand on the boy's arm as he unfastened the door between the two rooms, and whispered: —

"Now, be brave, for I know he is — all right. At least, just as you left him."

He went into the room, and beckoned to the girl. The man was just as he had left him, in a deep stupor. Marjie bent over him, watched him breathe, and pressed her cool fingers to his forehead. It was not strange that she knew how to nurse. It was natural, just as it was natural for her to be womanly.

"It must be the fever, Jerry," she said softly. "We must do something at once. First, let's try to place him in a more comfortable position. See, he's all doubled up on one of his shoulders. There, that's right. Now lift him very, very carefully, — so. Now that's better."

A faint groan came from the man as Jerry brought him around in position. But for the time, his troubles with his conscience slept.

"He must be in awful pain," said Jerry,

seating himself upon the side of the bunk.

"Yes," answered Marjie, "but he is happily unconscious of it. We hurt him when we moved him; I wonder how. Now, Jerry, get some wood, and I'll build the fire while you go for some cold, — ice cold water. We will make that tea just as soon as possible. Such a pillow! I must lower his head."

While the boy was gone, Marjie removed the great blanket that was folded in shape for a pillow, and brought his head into an easier position. Then with quick, effective fingers, she arranged the covering about the unconscious man.

Suddenly she gave a low, startled exclamation, and holding her hand before her eyes, looked at it steadily. She heard Jerry come in with the wood. In an instant she was at his side, holding out her hand before his startled face.

"See, Jerry, he has not got the fever! It is — it is blood! His bed is wet with it — all under his head! What does it mean?"

"Blood?" his face was as pale as death. "Blood! It can't be blood!" he cried, aghast.

"But it is! You must find out, Jerry, what caused it. Come, you must! Don't be frightened. You must be calm now, if you ever were. Think, his life may depend upon it! It does depend upon it!"

She half dragged him with her to the side of the bunk.

"No, you are trembling like a leaf. Sit down a minute there, then you will be all right. I can do it myself."

She slid one of her hands beneath the man's head, in the track of the blood. Then she remembered that he had lain on his shoulder in that same spot. Before Jerry had recovered from the weakness which the sight of blood had caused, she had torn the covering from the man's shoulder and laid bare a cruel looking bullet wound.

"An' he never told me! He never said a word about it! Ike, if you die, I swear I'll kill the man that did it!"

The boy's fear of blood had vanished. He sank down upon his knees beside the wounded man and buried his face in the blankets. Marjie was scarcely less affected. Her eyes glittered under sharply drawn brows. In her heart she echoed his sentiment.

"Shot in his back by a coward! See, the bullet entered here. There is no place to show where it came out; — it must be in there yet."

Jerry lifted up his head and looked closely where Marjie pointed. Then he spoke as he might have spoken had the man been dead.

"Yes, shot in the back while he was stooping over the pan of sand, washin' out the dust. My God, I'll never rest till I've paid back the fellow that killed you!"

"Hush! Would you be a murderer because another has tried to be one? He has failed, I tell you, — fooled! We won't let him die! He shall not die! See, I can feel the bullet! It's right here, and we'll have to get it out some way. If we only had a doctor!"

After the wound was bathed, the girl, with skill born of the moment, probed for the bullet and extracted it. Then she cleansed out the wound and bound it up carefully with bandages torn from her own white underskirt.

In thinking it over afterward, it seemed to her that she had stood by and watched some one do it for her.

CHAPTER XVI.

A SURPRISING AND UNUSUAL HOLDUP.

AFTER it was all done, the man seemed to breathe easier, though he did not regain consciousness. The girl's assurances that he would recover made Jerry feel hopeful, yet she herself scarcely dared hope, though by sheer force of will she determined that he must live.

"It's like this, Jerry: The loss of so much blood, the pain of the wound, and his neglect of it, have brought a fever upon him. In a little while longer he would have effected his own suicide most completely. Now he must live whether he wants to or not. He must have proper stimulant and nourishment; then the fever will take care of itself. But the tea would do him more harm than good now. If we only had some

fresh beef! What have you in the house? Have you beef, or eggs, — or even whiskey?"

"No, we ain't got anything like that," answered Jerry. Then more brightly, "But I can get beef. There's some good ones about a mile back in the coulee, an' there's eggs, and most likely whiskey, down at Lil's."

Margie made a motion of dissent.

"Yes, true; there's beef and eggs in Chicago, but that isn't here. We want them now!"

"It won't take me more than an hour to kill one of those steers down there, and cut a piece out of it. I can have it back here in less than an hour."

"But the cattle aren't yours. It would be against the law to kill one."

"What's the law beside Ike's life? Anyway, there's some of Tom Howell's cattle down there, an' I can pay for one of 'em afterwards."

Marjie brightened. "Oh, I'm so glad! Of course, kill one. If Tom knew, he would be pleased that you did

so. Do you think that you can be back in less than an hour?"

"Yes, sure of it," answered Jerry. "It ain't anywhere near dark yet. You won't be afraid to stay alone, will you?"

"No," she answered in a low voice. "When I see a man so near death as this, I should be ashamed to feel fear. Now, go quickly so that you can get back before dark."

The boy went to the kitchen and took from beneath a loose board in the floor a belt and a brace of six-shooters. He buckled on the belt as he hurriedly left the house, then he returned and procured a knife from the same place. Marjie came near him, and he turned to her impulsively, saying: —

"I don't like to leave you alone here. It don't seem right, but you're the bravest girl that ever lived. Here, take one of these; it might make you feel safer."

He handed her one of the guns from his belt, which she took from him with great caution, then laid it carefully upon a table in the farther room, covering it with her large hat.

"I shall feel much safer with that out of sight, for I have a horror of a revolver. But I know how to shoot a rifle for I've practiced all summer. If anyone comes shall I shoot them?"

This last was said half mischievously. Jerry answered quickly as he passed out: "No one will come. No one ever comes — now. If they do come, you can be sure that they've no business around."

Marjie built the fire and found a dozen little things to do. Every few moments she would go to the man's bedside and look at him anxiously. A light breeze came through the open door of the kitchen, bringing with it the cool of the evening. The girl worked briskly, keeping down the strange feeling of fear and anxiety that would rise in her heart.

When a half hour had passed, it seemed to her that Jerry had been gone much longer than he had intended, though it was still daylight outside. She remembered noticing a watch in the back room among the man's clothes, so

she went in there to get it. It would keep her company. From the bunk two dark eyes watched her wonderingly, as in the dimness of the room, she raised the watch close to her face to ascertain the time, and was startled at the earliness. How slowly the time had passed! The last hour or two seemed like days. But Jerry had come at last, even sooner than he had expected. A step crossed the threshold and Marjie advanced eagerly to meet him, but when she reached the side of the man's bed, she drew back in alarm. It was not Jerry! Whoever it was stepped quickly back to the doorway when he saw a figure outlined in the dim room beyond. Evidently he had not expected to see anyone.

Step by step, Marjie moved back, so still and evenly that she seemed to the watching stranger not to move at all. Her hand touched the table, then her hat: she felt for the revolver and drew it carefully behind her. Then just as she had walked backward, she walked forward, step by step, until she stood in the

doorway beside the man's bed, just opposite to the stranger who watched her in fascination. The light from the outside door shone full upon her. He could see her distinctly. Then a bit of bright metal flashed before her, and she called out clearly:

"Put up your arms! High, or I'll shoot!"

He had been fairly caught. The dim light of the farther room had revealed to him a woman, and he, who had expected to see no living person, had stood there watching the quiet figure, wondering if she were going backward or forward, or standing still, and whether she was a woman or an apparition. And so he had been caught. His dark face turned pale as he obeyed her. She continued in a clear voice:

"You may not know it, but I am a *dead shot.*" (This was scarcely true.) "If you make one movement, I will kill you without hesitation. Now, please answer a few questions. I won't detain you long. What do you want here?"

"I just come up to see His Highness. I swear I won't do nothing, and I'll give you my gun if you'll point that six-shooter the other way."

"No; when you have answered my questions you can go, but not before. Are you in the habit of coming here?"

"Yes," he answered, "I belong here. Ain't you goin' to take that gun down?"

"No; that gun stays there until I've finished!" exclaimed the girl angrily. "You prove yourself to be a coward and no gentleman — no man, to be afraid of a gun! Attend strictly to my questions. What is your name?"

The man muttered something unintelligible.

"Your name, I said; what is it?"

"I'm Kid, — Kid Cory," he answered gruffly.

"Be easy, now," said Marjie quietly. "Remember you are speaking to a lady — and a *dead shot!* Why is it you are on bad terms with Mr. ——, His Highness? Tell me the truth!"

"Because he, — I ain't on no bad terms with him! Who said I was?"

"You said so yourself. Now tell me exactly why you came here."

"I came to see if he was home."

"Yes, I believe you tell the truth. I dare say you came to see if he *was* home! I dare say I could tell you anything you want to know, you, — you!" —

A hand reached out from the bunk beside her, and pulled faintly at her dress. She heeded the warning and collected herself in time, continuing in a lower, less steady voice: —

"I see you thought His Highness was away from home or you would not have ventured here. It is true he has been away, but not far, and I was instructed to keep everyone away from the premises until his return. He won't be long, now, and I advise you to go away quickly. If you will go at once, like the gentleman that I dare say you are, I will not mention the fact to him that you have been here. If you do not go quietly, and as you should, I will shoot you, — not to kill, however. But he is near enough for the shot to reach his ears.

You know what will happen then. Now you may go. Good-evening, Mr. — Cory. I fear you will think that I have been very rude to you, but it was unavoidable."

"I won't hold no bad feelings toward you if you hold your tongue about this. Don't you be a-goin' an' tellin' any one," said Kid, as he turned and walked quickly away, anxious above all else to get out of range of that gun and those cool, glittering eyes.

Marjie stood in the doorway and watched him until he was out of sight, then she turned and went to the man's bedside.

CHAPTER XVII.

WHAT MATTERS A NAME?

THE hand that had plucked at her skirt hung limply beside the bunk. His eyes were closed, and but for an odd expression of anxiety about his mouth, he might have been in the same unconscious condition as before.

Marjie stood beside him, nervously realizing that he was awake, a strange feeling of embarrassment stealing over her. Suddenly the pitifulness of his condition rushed upon her mind. She lifted the limply hanging arm and placed it beside him as tenderly as a mother could have done, then asked: —

"How do you feel? Would you like a drink or anything? Don't answer if you don't feel like it. I am so glad that you are better!"

A smile, if an expression so sad may be called a smile, came to the man's face, and Marjie felt a surprise that she had not noticed before how grand and noble he looked.

"I am making you much trouble," he said, with an effort to raise his voice above a whisper.

"Yes; a terrible lot! So much that my shoulders are getting stooped." She laughed softly. "But you've saved me much trouble by waking up and feeling better. Your fever has gone down." She laid her hand upon his forehead. "We — Jerry has been so worried about you. He went out to get something that I wanted for you. He will be so glad to find you better. You are very weak and need good nourishment, then you will be all right. Promise me that you will try to get well!"

He smiled again in answer, then for the first time opened his eyes and looked at her.

"I have no desire to die, — now."

"Then you must do everything that I tell you; — promise me."

"Absolute obedience."

"Then," she continued, "don't attempt to talk, or to think, even. Drink this water and try to sleep. I will stay by you, so."

He drank from the cup she held, then taking one of her hands in his own, he closed his eyes and tried to do her bidding. He made but a pretense, having, as he thought, no desire for sleep; but in a short time he really slept, naturally and peacefully. Then Marjie gently loosened her hand from his slight grasp and left his side.

Jerry came soon afterward, looking anxious and worried. He carried part of a hind-quarter of beef on his saddle, and stopping before the door, laid it upon a box outside the house. His relief to see Marjie safe, and to learn that Ike had recovered consciousness, was great. The girl cut up a portion of the beef and showed him how to extract the juice and make the tea. He watched her carefully as she proceeded; finally he said:—"It's dark now, but there's goin' to be a good

moon. You'd better go back, hadn't you?"

"Yes," answered Marjie; "for I don't want any one to know that I have been here. I don't think that *he*," pointing to the farther room, "would like to have it known, — even that he was shot. So if I go back now they won't know but that I've been to Winter's, as I intended when I started out. It seems as though that was some time last week! I think that he will be all right now. You give him the beef tea when he wakens, and I will try to come real early in the morning. But I wonder if that horse of mine can find its way down to the ranch to-night?"

"I tell you what to do," spoke up Jerry. "You ride Lady. She'll take you down there all right. I can keep your horse till morning."

"That's fine," answered Marjie. "I can say that I met you and that we traded horses, — all perfectly true. Even if it is after dark when I get there, they won't think anything about it. Only it

would be rather embarrassing if George Howell should ride up to Winter's to get me; but it is not at all probable that he will do so. You won't make any noise, Jerry, — not the least. Let him sleep as long as he will,— the longer the better; then be sure to give him the tea as I told you."

"You don't need to worry. Ike's all I've got, an' I'll do my best. I'll change saddles, so's you can go. It ain't real pitch-dark out, an' there's goin' to be a good moon in a few minutes. You can see the light of it behind that mountain over there."

Jerry spoke very softly for fear of waking the sleeping man; then he tiptoed out of the house to change the saddles.

Marjie gave the final touches to some food which she had been preparing; then she took the small lamp and placed it on the table in the adjoining room, making a shade for it out of an old newspaper. She picked up her hat and quietly went out, pausing for an instant beside the wounded man to ascertain if he still slept.

After a few more instructions to Jerry, she mounted the pony, and trusting blindly to its instinct, rode away in the darkness. The moon did not shine fully above the mountains until she passed the old cabin; then a great relief came over her. The evening with its excitement, its tragedy, and its unfoldment, seemed dim and unreal. In the distance lay the ranch-house and large sheep-sheds,—huge, dark-looking in the moonlight. With the relief of a certain nervous tension came a weariness, a drowsiness, almost overwhelming. A great longing to reach the ranch unperceived, to go direct to her room and her bed, came over her. How long had she been there in the mountains? With a start she remembered that early that same morning she had said good-by to Kitty and the babies, and had set out alone for the mountains. She sat bolt upright in the saddle and laughed softly. Truly it seemed weeks! In that one day she had lived months, or years. She had gone to the assistance of the man who had declined her friend-

ship, she had unraveled the mystery, and faced the person who committed the crime. All this, and more — much more — in one evening.

Then from the bewildering mass of thoughts came one clear and dominating. — She had brought help to this man, His Highness, or Ike, — what mattered his name? He had been pleased — comforted — by her presence, and now, perhaps, as he slept, he dreamed that he still held her hand within his own.

She raised the hand before her in the moonlight, and smiled softly at the thought; then on a sudden she became frightened, her face pale, as upon the palm a dark spot appeared.

It was but the shadow of a fluttering ribbon between her hand and the moon, yet to her sensitive imagination it seemed to be an indelible spot of blood.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A FORAGING PARTY OF ONE.

MARJIE was still nervous as she rode up to the corral and began with unsteady hands to remove the saddle from the gray pony. She hoped that she might gain her room unperceived, but with the hope came quick steps and a man's voice not far away, saying: —

"Is that you, Marjie? Has your horse changed color since you left? I was beginning to get pretty uneasy about you, and thought it was Jerry when you rode up. I was just going to get him to hunt you up."

"You must never worry about me." The girl's voice sounded languid, as though she were completely tired out. She hesitated for an instant, then went on: — "I didn't intend to be so late to-night, but the time passes quickly, before

one has time to realize it. I liked Jerry's pony so well that he let me exchange with him. Not for keeps, though. I wish it were. But isn't it the dearest pony you ever saw?"

"Lady's all right. I'd rather ride a good sized horse, myself. So Jerry was with you?"

"Yes; I met him just as I went to turn into Winters' ranch. He is a nice boy. — I am very fond of Taggie, too; — and you, and — all of you are so kind to me. I shall enjoy every moment of my stay here. You must not mind if I run about considerably, will you?"

"Not a bit of it! All that I'm looking out for is that you don't get lonesome or homesick. No; I'm glad you like the Winter family, and Jerry is a pretty good boy. He'll make a good comrade for you."

Marjie felt a revulsion, a feeling of disgust, that she should practice deceit upon so kind a friend. She had been so open and frank in all her actions and thoughts throughout her whole life that

she felt a certain shrinking from her present predicament. In time she became used to it. Now she had but entered upon her "dream life," out of which was to grow all the pain of reality.

When she entered the house, she found the woman sitting serenely near the open door, apparently waiting for her. *In* wait, would be nearer the truth, for a whole evening's bottled-up talk gushed forth joyfully and unreservedly, before the girl had an opportunity to be seated. But as the woman talked, Marjie dropped down upon the nearest chair and waited for a lull that she might escape.

What was it she was saying? Something about feeding the dogs, or was it the chickens? Her thoughts refused to take the pace of the woman's tongue, but traveled on over the hills to the retreat that she had just left. Had Ike awakened, and had Jerry managed the tea properly? Would that strange, bad-looking man return and trouble him? Why had she not told Jerry about the circumstance? If the woman would but

cease her chatter! Fortunately George Howell came to her rescue.

"Let up, Lil. Can't you see that Marjie's plumb played out? Aren't you?" he asked, turning to the girl.

"Yes; somewhat," she replied. "I got up very early this morning so as to get started while it was cool. That makes me stupid and sleepy to-night. If you will both excuse me, I think that I will go to bed."

"Why, of course," the woman exclaimed. "I might of known that you were all played out if I'd been thinkin' about it. Don't you want a bite to eat before you turn in? No? Well, I'll just go with you and fetch this lamp along."

Lil lighted the lamp and placed it upon a table in Marjie's room, then proceeded with her talk.

"How'd you like the way we fixed up this room? It'll do, won't it? I reckon it needed it pretty much. George, he thought you ought to have things just as good as you had at Tom's, or even better,

so when he went into town he bought this here Brussels carpet and them curtains. *They* were marked Brussels point; — I don't see why, but of course anyone can see they're some kind of a pointed lace. They're real pretty, but I don't care much about curtains, myself. In fact, I never go much on the luxuries of life. Give me good victuals, an' plenty of 'em, an' I can get along without any fine things. But I'm glad you're pleased with it. George was sayin' that it wasn't half as good as you're used to, but land sakes, if you can't content yourself in this here room now, with all these new fixings, — I don't see; — an' that new bureau, too; — ain't that a fine glass on it? You'll be able to look at yourself all you want to in that, I reckon. That's fine trimmin' you've got on that underwaist. Do you have to run them ribbons around every time it's washed? My, but girls do have a lot of fixings! You've got nice, long hair, but I'd think it'd be a lot of bother to brush it out like that every night. I wouldn't have the pa-

tience. I suppose mine would be better if I'd do it. But what's the difference when a person's married?"

She stopped to take breath. Marjie impatiently laid down her hair brush and said quickly: —

"*Good-night.* I won't keep you up any longer. You and — your husband have been so kind to me. I can't find words to express my gratitude to-night, — I am so tired. — To-morrow, though, there will be lots to say. Good-night."

The woman, loath to leave, walked slowly out. There was no alternative, for Marjie held open the door and mutely invited her to go. But Lil felt no offense, for the girl possessed the rare quality of being able to say and do anything without offending people; — the power to impress every one that her opinion was infallible — such a power is one of the most convenient equipments of life.

Marjie was up at daybreak the next morning, and then, for the first time, and she devoutly prayed it would be the last, proceeded to do a little foraging. She wanted

eggs and milk and bread for the wounded man, but was too much of a stranger in the house to know where those articles were kept. Taggie would have gloried in the act, and would doubtlessly have succeeded better. Marjie thought of it, and in spite of her fearfulness, smiled slightly. Taggie should have had her place in all this deception. It seemed to herself little short of a crime. Moving with great caution about the kitchen, she carefully searched the cupboard, and looked on the shelves and in every nook and corner where the necessary provisions might be placed. Finally, in an old clothes boiler, shoved out of sight under the kitchen table, she discovered the bread. With many misgivings she took from the goodly supply one loaf, which she wrapped carefully in a cloth flour sack that she found among the dish-towels. Eggs were not to be found, and she dared search no more in the kitchen for fear of arousing the people. She was equally afraid of arousing the hens, so she noiselessly left the house.

Lady was in the small pasture apparently waiting for her. She led the pony by the mane to the corral, where she saddled it.

Quickly and quietly the small animal carried her out of sight of the ranch. Then the girl, with cheeks burning from the excitement of her adventure, laughed in a wonderfully low, sweet way, and patting Lady upon the neck, called her many endearing names.

It is uncertain that the pony understood the words, yet there is small doubt that it well knew the spirit from whence they came, — and even a horse would not resent that.

CHAPTER XIX.

INTO THE VERY NUCLEUS OF THE BLACK FANCIES.

THE sun was just beginning to creep out from behind the mountains when Marjie rode up to the cabin in the Retreat. She congratulated herself upon being so early, yet her face wore a look of anxious questioning when Jerry opened the door.

"He ain't any worse," was his greeting, "but he's powerful weak. I'm awful glad you've come!"

"You haven't slept," she said, noting the boy's tired face.

"That's nothin'," he replied. "What's one night? I guess I ain't a baby, an' it ain't goin' to hurt me any."

"Is *he* awake?" she asked, still standing beside the door.

"I ain't sure; he was a while back,

but I kind of think he's sleepin', — at least he looks like it. Just go in quiet, an' see. You can tell better'n I can. I'll go an' take care of Lady."

He moved toward his horse while speaking, and Marjie quietly entered the cabin. She stood irresolutely in the center of the first room for a moment, a flush creeping gradually over her face, then with a sudden hardening of expression, she laid the loaf of bread that she had brought down upon the table, and walked with quiet, resolute steps to the man's bedside.

A shade of newspapers that she had fastened over the small window the previous evening darkened the room considerably, so that for a moment she could not tell whether the quiet man before her was asleep or awake. Becoming accustomed to the semi-darkness, she saw that his eyes were closed, and she bent low over him to catch the faint sound of his breath.

But the man, apparently unconscious, was curiously alive, — alive to the faint

sweetness of the girl's presence, to the hair that softly touched his arm, and to the breath, half-suppressed in fear of disturbing him. A great desire to live, to fight down the past, and to take his place in the world as the man he was, and should have been, at that moment took possession of him, as in all history the same sweet cause has ever moved mankind to great and noble works, to higher thoughts.

A quick breath, the quiver of eyelids, betrayed him. Marjie straightened instantly, a startled exclamation escaped her lips, and she moved involuntarily away from the bunk. The man looked at her direct, and raised his arm to detain her, at which the woman in her awoke, she recovered her composure, and said with some concern: —

"You mustn't move that arm, you'll loosen all the bandages. See, I will have to fix them all over. But then, they must need it by this time. I thought you were asleep and you startled me. I've come to look after you a little this

morning, to get your breakfast; in fact I am your physician and head nurse, so you must obey orders, sir, or the next time I will send a substitute, — Lil, for instance."

She quickly dressed the wounded shoulder, and over the white bandage tied a bright red silk handkerchief which she took from her own neck. "Now you look quite gay," she laughed. "But it may prevent you from taking cold in the wound."

"Does Lil — or any one know about this, — of your coming here?" asked the wounded outlaw.

The strength of his voice astonished her. She looked at him oddly as she replied: "No one knows except the man who came here last night, — the man that shot you, — the one who said his name was Kid. I didn't tell, — not because I feel it wrong for me to be here, — because it isn't wrong, and I don't care at all what people think; — I didn't keep silent for that reason, but because you — because, — well, if *you* want to

publish it you may, but it isn't any of my business!"

"Little girl," the man's voice but faintly hid the depth of feeling that stirred his soul, "I don't know what strange workings of Providence sent you here, to bring a poor devil back to a life he would gladly have left, — to a life made blacker than Hell by his own dark thoughts. I don't see why you have brought your sweet self to the very nucleus of those dark fancies you told me about. My brain is clear. I think that you have brought me nearer to a sort of Heaven, the harmony of your own pure soul. It is something to have lived a death for. No, I haven't finished, — just one moment. If any harm comes to you through this, then may I meet a worse death than this would have been!"

He ceased speaking. Tears sprang to the girl's eyes. For the time she felt all the misery, the pitifulness of his life. With bowed head she spoke: — "You must not speak so, or think so. — If harm comes to me, that is my affair, — and

God's. You are not responsible for my welfare. You have your own life to look out for, — and your own duties. Your first duty is to get well, so you must not talk again until you've eaten something and rested well. I will get you some of the beef tea that Jerry made for you."

During the next hour, Marjie kept the boy busy moving about doing small tasks for her, and when she mounted the gray pony to ride back to the ranch, the interior of the cabin wore a different aspect, and the man slept soundly and naturally.

The girl would have been better pleased to have left the pony for Jerry's use, but she thought that if she rode her own horse back to the ranch at so early an hour, it might be a difficult matter to explain how she happened to meet with Jerry and make the exchange. Untruths were distasteful to her. She thought that one, at least, might be avoided, and possibly a few embarrassing questions, if she went a short distance out of her way and looked in upon Taggie.

She did so, and found the young girl assisting her mother with the family washing, while Frost with bandaged hand sat serenely near. The other sisters were out of sight.

Taggie nodded brightly, and squeezing the soap-suds from her small red hands, ran up to Marjie.

"I see that you are already doing penance," laughed Marjie, "and that very early in the morning. I intended to come last evening to inquire if Frost's hand was better, but I met Jerry out there on the road, and we went for a ride. How is she? I can only stay a moment, for I must go back and straighten up my room."

"*She*, — umph! If it ain't one thing, it's another! I generally do pay for my sins on wash-day. If I didn't have to work, I'd go home with you. I'd skip it all, anyway, if it wasn't for Ma, but I ain't agoin' to let her do it all, and them big lubbers of girls layin' around doin' nothing! I wish I'd known you an' Jerry were out last night, I'd 'a'gone with you.

He don't like to come here much on Pa's account, but just wait till I get a little older; — I bet I'll have things different then! I guess you must 'a' been swappin' horses, ain't you? I wouldn't mind trading for that one, but I wouldn't trade Dandy. No, sir! Ain't you goin' to get down?"

"No; not this time," replied her friend; "and if I stay much longer, I won't get any breakfast at all."

"Well, you're right smart to get around like this before you eat," remarked Mrs. Winter from over her washboard. "Better come in an' get a snack."

"No, thank you," answered Marjie, turning the pony toward the road, "not this time, for Mrs. Howell will be making preparations for me. Good-bye, — and Taggie, when you get time, come down and we'll go for a ride."

"Sure I will!" called the young girl.

CHAPTER XX.

AN APPALLING TRUTH.

WHEN Marjie reached the corral at the ranch, a strange man advanced to meet her, and in a good Irish brogue addressed her. "Jist wait a minute, an' I'll help yez down. Sure, an' you're an early bird to get out in the rafreshin' part o' the mornin'! Now, I could just as well help yez down, but it's an independant spirit yez have. You won't object to me takin' care o' the critter, will yez? I've been after seein' that animal before."

"You're very kind," answered Marjie coolly, "but I prefer to take care of the pony, myself."

The Irishman cocked his head upon one side and looked at her curiously as she uncinched the saddle. After a moment

he spoke again: "Mebbe yer offended because I didn't introduce meself to yer. I forgot me manners intirely, for which I beg yer pardon. I'm the workin' man here, — the foreman, an' me name's Tim Brady. If I can be of any sarvice to yer just let me know. I'm wishin' yez good-mornin', ma'am."

Marjie's face dimpled with laughter from behind Lady. Here *was* a character! She pointed to the saddle that she had placed upon the ground. "I accept your services and your acquaintance with pleasure. You may hang that up with the other saddles, since you are so anxious to assist me, but I prefer to take care of Lady myself."

Without waiting for a reply from the ready tongued Irishman, the girl walked quickly away, leading by the bridle Jerry's gray pony. Tim opened his mouth to speak, then thinking better of it, stood staring after her. When she reached the small pasture, the Irishman ceased his staring, closed his mouth suddenly, and picking up the saddle, sham-

bled off to the stable. As she walked along the path toward the house, Marjie was greeted by George Howell with: "Well, I thought you were sound asleep. You've sure come it on us this morning! I told Lil in there not to make any noise so as to disturb you, and she's been walking around there on her tiptoes. You look fine! You ought to go out like this every morning."

"Yes," replied Marjie, swinging her hat carelessly by its long strings, "I believe I will, for it's surely invigorating. Have you been to breakfast?"

"Yes; we just got up from the table, but you go in there, and Lil'll fix you out. I've got to ride over to the hay-camp."

"I've just had the honor of meeting your Irishman, — your foreman, as he calls himself," she remarked, moving on toward the house.

Howell laughed slightly and seemed loath to leave her. "Yes; they most all call themselves that," he answered, thinking more of the girl than of what he was

saying. "But I always look after my own business. In the summer there's only the haying here on the ranch, for the sheep's all on the north range; but I have to be away a good deal, — more than in winter, — for then the whole thing's right here under my eye. I almost wish it was winter now."

"How can you say that!" exclaimed Marjie, moving backward slowly. "This beautiful summer! It is a grand and glorious privilege just to live and breathe in this air!"

Howell stood watching her, an odd expression upon his face, until she disappeared within the house.

Marjie ate her breakfast in time with the woman's chatter. To-day she did not mind it in the least. In some manner she drew a certain amount of amusement from it; and the woman, to do her justice, appreciated the girl's attentive interest, and soon felt for her a stronger liking than she had before experienced for any one.

Marjie could not return her affection,

but the woman probably never knew it, nor did she realize the great pity that gradually formed and grew in the girl's heart for her. While she lingered at the breakfast table, George Howell rode up to the house, and throwing the bridle-reins to the ground, walked with clinking spurs hurriedly through the open doorway, and carelessly seated himself near the girl who half rose as he entered.

"Here, don't let me frighten you out," said Howell, "I've just come in for a minute, anyway, before I go away. It's going to be a hot day."

Marjie sank back into her former position, a quaint smile of amusement upon her face. "You people who live in these mountains do not know what a 'hot' day means. You should live in California or down there on the prairie where Tom and Kitty live. Then you *might* talk! You ought to be the happiest people on the face of the earth, — if weather has any influence on one's happiness."

"I don't believe that I quite under-

stand what that word means," remarked Howell, in a lower tone. Then leaning toward her, he continued, "But I've often wondered, — lately. I never used to think much about it, one way or another. I suppose you understand it well enough, — what it means?"

Marjie looked at him searchingly for an instant, as though compelled by some strong power to fathom the hidden meaning of his words; and down in depths deeper than she had ever realized she found the truth, — recognized it, felt it, and then fearlessly dismissed it as a thought unworthy of her to entertain. But for a time the thing stayed by her.

"Happiness," she said slowly, as if weighing the word, "I have been taught that it is here for all the world alike. We take it or we leave it. Our lives from day to day determine that."

"But if one loses it; — what then?" asked the man. "Isn't there some chance of getting it back again? Is it gone forever?"

"Why do you ask me?" Marjie quer-

ied. "I do not know the extent of your — of the unhappiness!" Then in a softer tone, she continued: "I only know this, that happiness can only come through truth; — that it is inseparable from it, — from honesty and justice and kindness, — and all that goes to make up a good life."

Howell did not look at her as she ceased speaking. She remained silent for a moment, then suddenly springing up, exclaimed in her own bright manner:

"Come, wake up! Get out into this glorious air, and if you listen well you will hear a sermon such as no human voice can preach. If you listen and can't hear it, I advise you to take the 'starvation cure,' for your digestion must be badly out of order."

They went outside of the house, and she stood near him when he mounted. When his horse had gone a dozen yards, he wheeled it around and came back to her. "Tell Lil, when she gets through her confab with that Irishman, that I

won't be home till evening. Hello, here comes Jerry! Well, have a good time. I've got to go. I'm having some trouble with the men over there. Why, what's the matter?"

Her face had grown very pale. He looked at her wonderingly. Then the red came into his own face and he leaned nearer to her.

"The trouble don't amount to much. Don't worry! Good-by, little girl." He turned and rode quickly away.

It is doubtful if she heard his words, for every thought was concentrated on the approaching boy and what his sudden appearance might possibly signify. Fears of the worst went through her mind. It was scarcely two minutes from the time that she first saw Jerry approaching until he rode up to her, yet so rapidly had her thoughts come that she had already figured out how quickly Lady could be saddled, what excuses she would make, and another mad ride up to the Retreat. —All this and many details, yet she waited in suspense for Jerry.

"Well, why don't you say something?" she sharply demanded, as the boy, having dismounted some distance away, walked leisurely toward her.

"Good-morning," he replied, astonished at her tone. "I thought I'd come down an' change horses with you, — that is if you want to change."

Marjie recovered herself instantly. A low "Oh," took with it all the fear and foreboding, and the strange weight that had settled down upon her heart. "I didn't know but that you had come to spend the day, go fishing, or something of that sort," she said.

He looked at her reproachfully. "You never thought nothin' like that. There ain't anyone around, is there? You see it was like this; he was sleeping just fine, an' I thought that seeing there was a lot of things I'd ought to get for him, I'd come now an' get it over with. We're pretty short of some things in the grub line. It's all right for well folks, but when someone's sick, it's a different matter."

"Are you sure he was sleeping soundly, — that he won't waken while you are away?" she asked anxiously.

"Sure's I can be," he replied, uneasy and surprised at the note of concern in her voice. "He'll be all right. I ain't been gone more'n a half hour yet, for I rode like blazes. But if you say so, I'll turn right around an' go back to him."

"That *would* be folly. What did you come for? I could have brought whatever you wanted, or I could have stayed there while you came after the things. I *don't* like leaving him alone. What if that man who shot him came back to finish his work? I thought when you came that you brought bad news. I never dreamed that you would be so rash!"

"What man shot him?" His face had turned quite white. Marjie did not reply. He waited for an instant, then turned about quickly as if to retrace his steps. At the corner of the house he stopped and braced himself against the

log wall. Marjie came up behind him and took him by the arm.

"Come, what is it you want to get? Tell me so that you may get the things and go. Never mind who shot him. Ask *him* if you want to know."

CHAPTER XXI.

"WHEN YOU ARE WELL I WILL NOT BE SO PARTICULAR."

"THERE'S a lot of things I ought to get," answered Jerry. "But I reckon if I get everything at once, Lil 'll think it's kind of funny."

"Yes, that is so," said Marjie thoughtfully; "but I'll tell you what to do, Jerry. First, go and change horses, and then when that's done, ask Lil for the principal things, including eggs, for I can't find them to save my life. I know some of the things that you need, and I intended to bring them up there this afternoon. This morning I couldn't find anything. I'll get some cloth for bandages, and some salve, and — I wish I knew where the woman keeps her whiskey."

"It's in a demijohn under the head of her bed," he answered promptly. "That is, if it ain't empty. I'll hurry up an' change this saddle to Lady, an' come back after the things."

When Jerry returned from the small pasture, Marjie had secured everything that she thought would be needful to the sick man, and it was well that she had done so, for the inhabitants of the Retreat were nearly out of provisions, and if medicines had been added to the long list that the boy requested of the woman, her suspicion would doubtlessly have been aroused. As it was, she merely remarked in her characteristic way, as she handed him the eggs tightly tied in the end of a flour sack, —

"Seems like you fellers are getting a little extravagant, ain't you? Flour an' eggs an' butter, too, — but I guess His Highness knows what he wants. I was tellin' George the last time he went to town that he'd better find out what you fellers wanted in the grub line, an' bring it out, for you must be gettin' pretty short

by this time. He'll be agoin' in again pretty soon, and you can send for what you want. It'll soon be time to send for the winter supply. I reckon you won't need as much as you did last winter, will you? Tell His Highness to come down here and get a square meal sometime. It's been a long time since I seen him. Well, you'll be pretty well loaded down. Here, Marjie's got something for you. Some more papers, I reckon."

"No," said Marjie, with a sparkle of merriment in her eyes, "not papers this time, but something that will serve to occupy the time equally well. Now carry it carefully, Jerry. Come down again *when you can stay longer.*"

Marjie took the woman to one side and talked with her so that she would not delay the boy. Jerry took the hint and rode quickly away, for he was filled with anxiety which Marjie's words had brought out. What if the man who had shot Ike should return? Nothing would be more natural. He had wondered who it was that had committed

the crime until his brain reeled, then he had thrust the thought to one side, meaning to take it up again when Ike should be fully recovered. He felt sure that Marjie knew; — but how?

How wonderfully knowing she was, and how indispensable she had already become to them, — to these outlaws!

The boy was not an outlaw, but it was the name that he had always called himself. Before Marjie came he had taken a certain pride in it, but the mere association with her had brought out all that was highest and best in his nature. She had accomplished what Ike had failed to do. But then Ike was a poor object-lesson for the boy.

It happened that when Jerry reached the Retreat, he found his friend still sleeping as when he had left him, nor was there any sign of an intruder. Yet in the light of what Marjie had said to him, he felt that his fears had not been groundless; and he made a resolve that in the future he would not leave Ike until he was able to take care of himself.

In the afternoon of that same day the sharp ears of the half-dozing boy caught the sound of a horse's hoofs as they struck the stony creek bottom in the entrance of the Retreat.

He jumped to his feet, fully awake, and listened intently. It could be no other than Marjie, he reasoned, yet the usual anxiety came upon him, and he waited in the shadow of the room.

"Jerry," quietly called the man from his bunk.

"I'm here," responded the boy.

"Someone's coming. Bring me my gun."

"It ain't no one but Marjie. Don't you worry! Here's your gun if you want it, but you ain't goin' to need it," said Jerry reassuringly, as he tiptoed to the man's bedside and handed him a six-shooter.

The horse drew nearer, crashing through the brush near the cabin. No outlaw would have approached in that manner. The man on the bed smiled and placed his gun out of sight.

"Jerry," called a sweet voice, then the girl herself pushed the door ajar and peered into the cabin.

The boy was beside her instantly, greeting her with a smile. There was no hesitation in her manner now, as she inquired about the sick man, and went straightway to him.

"My little physician," he said, raising his hand toward her. His eyes said more than that. She read it well and did not reject it. Laughing softly in her bewitching way, she drew a box near the bunk and seated herself beside him. She brought more than sunshine in the half-hour of light chatter that followed. Then she bethought herself of the boy and of his sleep-laden eyes that watched her as she talked. At her request he reluctantly stretched himself upon a bunk; and Marjie, promising to waken him when she left, sat beside His Highness in silence.

Finally Jerry slept, and then the girl went about many little tasks that required attention, preparing a lunch for the sick

man, and sitting beside him until he had eaten. When she removed the tin dishes he motioned to her to come back and stay near him.

"I think I may say that I am well now," he said.

"A remarkable recovery," she answered. "Then you no longer require my services."

"I don't see how I can dispense with them now. You wouldn't be so cruel!"

"No," she answered dreamily; "not as long as you really require me; not while I can be of any assistance to you. I am getting used to coming here now. I like it. The first time I rode up here by mistake, — weeks ago, — I felt that in some manner the place belonged to me. The feeling has never left me. Yet it seems strange that I should be here now, — like this. It won't be so easy for you to send me away again."

She looked up at him and smiled queerly at the recollection.

"You didn't think that I felt the way I acted that day, did you?"

"I didn't know. It was the uncertainty of it that" — She stopped abruptly.

"That what?" he asked.

A quick laugh accompanied by the ever ready coloring, then she answered,

"That cast a rosy tint of interest over the whole episode. I think that's what I meant to say but I got sort of mixed."

"Then you thought of it afterwards?"

"I have a memory," she said.

A silence ensued. Finally she looked up at him, compelled by his own gaze. Her eyes met his and lingered, then something crept into their depths; — it might have been the reflection from his own. It startled him. A tightening of expression settled upon his face. He spoke deliberately: —

"Do you know who I am?" Then without waiting for a reply, he continued: "You do not, — not what the world calls me. Possibly you have an idea that I am a doubtful character. I

am, — and worse. I am an outlaw. I want you to know it, — to realize who it is that you have befriended. I want you to know the worst. I am a fugitive, outlawed from civilization and respectability. I've been here for years in hiding, just because I prefer it to hanging.

"I've never had a trial. I escaped before they had a chance to try me, — rightly. It was a dead case against me. — Even if it had not been I could never have gone back into the world with such a charge put upon me. I wanted to live, — to breathe the fresh air, and to see God's blue sky above me. So I managed to escape and found myself a prisoner in this little valley, — a branded outlaw! There, you have it. No need of details. They do not alter the circumstance or make me anything better than I am, — an outlaw, — one of the wolves of humanity."

"Don't say that," exclaimed Marjie. "You wouldn't harm a single living thing! I do not believe that you could! You thought to frighten me by telling

me this. You have not done so. I knew that you were hiding for some reason, — I even thought that you were the leader of a band of desperadoes. I have learned better. I will tell you what I think, — that you never committed a great crime of any sort, — that it is an utter impossibility! And you never ran away because you were guilty, but because you were not guilty. If you had been guilty you would have taken your medicine like a man, but because you were not, you loved your life. You see I know you, even in so short a time. I know you and — I like you. I am glad you told me this, even though you did it to astonish and frighten me. If you care to tell me, I would like to know something more about this sad time in your life."

As she spoke, he looked at her in wonderment.

"There is nothing I would not tell you now." He spoke softly. "It may bore you, but then there is not very much of it to tell. My father died be-

fore I remember. My mother afterwards married a man whom I always respected, but never learned to love. Our wills very often clashed, and being an only child with a considerable fortune left me by my father, I have no doubt but that I was wilful, and to my step-father's high-strung nature a constant irritation.

"When I came home from school the last time, I found that my step-father's only nephew had taken a place in our small family. But I had outgrown some of my boyhood's foolishness, and I cannot remember that I ever thought of resenting his presence there. But I never liked him, and I never even took the pains to make his acquaintance.

"The summer after I left school, we were camping in the Rocky Mountains, — a small party of us, my step-father and two of his choicest friends, and my step-cousin, besides myself.

"One day my step-father reproached me for my indifferent treatment of his nephew. I resented it, and my words to

him, overheard by his friends, were not particularly choice. I saddled my horse and started for the nearest railroad point. That night I slept on the prairie. Two days later I was arrested at a ranch-house within fifteen miles of the railroad town for which I was making.

"My step-father had been found dead in camp the evening of the day I left. He had been shot through the back, and had a bullet hole in his heart. I was at once suspected of the crime. Everything went to prove my guilt. A brief trial was given me in that town, and on the march to the prison where I was to await trial in the higher courts, I escaped and came here. That is ten years ago.

"These years have passed like an ugly dream, — and now *you* have come! That is all that I can say or think; — *you* with your trust and your angel's face!"

She placed her hand softly over his mouth.

"Hush! A sick man must not talk so much. See, it is getting late, and I must go, so I will call Jerry. No, you

must not keep my hand! I promise," she said, as she gently disengaged it, "that when you are well, I will not be so — particular."

CHAPTER XXII.

A FEW QUESTIONS FROM THE OTHER SIDE.

DUSK had settled down over the mountains. Marjie was riding homeward. Her heart sang a new song, and it seemed as though it must burst with its glad fulness and strange happiness, painful in its intensity. She loved with all the wild impulsiveness of her nature, and knowing it, gloried in the fact. To her it seemed no secret. She would gladly have told it far and near, sharing her happiness with all the world.

Something of this showed upon her face, causing the dark-visaged man who waited for her in the brush to draw back and hesitate. But the light in the girl's face did not wholly unnerve him, for he sprang in front of her and caught the horse firmly by the bridle. The bay

leaped backward, nearly unseating its rider, but Marjie looked as cool as though she had been expecting just such a surprise.

"Well, I reckon you ain't got quite the advantage you had last time! Now I just want to ask *you* a few questions, an' I've got the gun on my side! See that you tell the truth!" His black eyes blazed.

She looked at him piercingly, then throwing back her head laughed immoderately. Evidently the situation possessed considerable humor for her.

"Shut up! You ain't asked to laugh. Listen to what I've got to say, will you?" He had little patience.

"I beg your pardon," she said between peals of laughter. "Really, I can't help it! — Your hat — looks so comical — over on one ear! —"

"Umph, — nice thing to laugh about!" he exclaimed, pulling the sombrero down upon his head.

Marjie ceased laughing, leaned slightly toward him, and looked at it critically.

"I don't like the way you've got it on now. It looks worse than before. Please let me show you how you should wear it. It isn't becoming that way, and it's an awfully pretty hat. It goes well with your style and complexion, too. Really, you bachelors who have no women about do get into dreadful ways! — You surely are not offended because I just mentioned it to you, are you? You must not misunderstand me, because I'd feel dreadfully if" —

"Never mind the hat! That ain't my business nor yours! I" —

"But a hat has more importance than you think," she interrupted. "Now, your hat put me into a good humor, whereas I ought to have been very angry with you for stopping my horse in that unceremonious manner. — Poor horse! You frightened him nearly to death. But I will overlook it if he will. Oh, yes, I believe you said that you wished to talk with me for a moment. Please talk rapidly, for I am in a dreadful hurry!"

"Well, you take the cake," he broke out.

"Yes, perhaps, but talk of something besides food, for it reminds me that I am nearly starved. Been to supper?"

"Say, now look a here! Don't you say another word till I tell you to speak! See this gun? Now answer sharp, an' no more blabbin'! Where have you been?"

"You wish me to speak now? You're sure of it?"

"Answer!"

"Well, you must swear that you'll never breathe a word of it to any living soul!—I think I can trust you. I've been up in the mountains. You see, I've struck it rich up there, but the prospect is in a sort of—well, undeveloped state, and it wouldn't do to tell people about it."

She looked at him as she might have done had he been her most confidential friend, yet her heart had begun to boil with sheer hatred of him for the injury she thought he had done to Ike. She wished to gain time for she did not know

what his object might be. Her ready mind was sifting every expression of his face and every word that he uttered.

"The devil, you've struck a mine! Girls don't prospect! Why, you couldn't even handle a spade, let alone a pick-ax! Where else have you been?"

"Honestly, I'm telling you the truth. Do you think that I'd lie?" She said this in an injured tone, then in an absent-minded way continued: "Of course, I don't have to tell you who was with me."

"That's just what you've got to do! Hurry up about it!"

He had been quick to take the wrong scent. She felt a great thankfulness that he had done so, for the welfare of this man so hunted and wronged meant already more to her than life itself. It seemed to her that this ruffian, Kid, was somewhat uncertain as to whether or not he had succeeded in killing His Highness, and was taking this course to discover the truth, or possibly the existing state of affairs.

Suddenly Marjie changed her tactics

and showed some anger. "Now, see here, Mr. Kid, it's my own business who I choose to — go with! You've no right to question me like this! I am sure George Howell will not like it, and I tell you right now, that it wouldn't be healthy for you if His Highness found this out! But if you will attend to your own affairs in the future, I will not mention it to any living soul, — for the actions of a *jealous* man ought simply to be ignored. If I choose in the future to ride with His Highness, or walk with His Highness, or talk with His Highness, I count it my own affair, — and if you ever expect me to be friendly with you, you will refrain hereafter from mentioning the matter to me! Now let go of my horse! It's getting late, and it makes me terribly nervous to ride in the dark! I wish you'd go down to the ranch with me. I'm hungry, too. Lil will have supper waiting. She is going to have Boston baked beans and fried chicken. Aren't you hungry? Get your horse and come along with me."

He had loosened his grasp from the bridle and stood nervously scraping his spur into the ground. So she had been *riding* with His Highness! Then he was unhurt and about. It would be safer to be friends with the girl. She might serve as a shield to him if Ike had found him out. It would be safer that way. And so she thought that he was jealous! Then he must have been mistaken. She could not possibly suspect him or know the truth of the matter. So he reasoned.

"Well, aren't you coming?" she asked impatiently.

"Don't know but I might as well, bein' as it's supper time," he answered, then he stalked through the bushes and secured his horse.

Marjie watched him anxiously. Now that the danger to Ike seemed averted, she felt a sudden collapse. Then the thought of her love came to her with all its strengthening power, stimulating her for what lay ahead. She had placed her self on the common level with this ruffian,

and the thought was not pleasant. No other way had occurred to her. In all probability no other way would have effected the same result, — would have reached his vanity and so deadened his wit.

The ride down to the ranch was uneventful. Kid seemed to have forgotten his speech, and Marjie, busy with her own thoughts, was thankful for it.

George Howell had not returned, — Lil was nowhere in sight, so the girl went straightway to her own room, and for a time, at least, was alone with her strange, new happiness.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A PAN OF DOUGHNUTS AND A PROPOSITION.

THE Irishman, Tim, sat high up on one end of the well-filled wood-box, within easy reach of a pan of tempting doughnuts that was placed upon the back of the stove.

Lil, her face a purplish, apoplectic hue, leaned over a kettle of smoking lard, carefully turning the plump, brown cakes. Occasionally she glanced up reprovingly at Tim, pretending to scold him for the regular disappearance of the doughnuts. In reality she enjoyed the compliment which he paid to her cookery, and also the many questionable compliments which his ready tongue formed for her satisfaction and pleasure.

It is remarkable, but the woman had some vanity. What woman is not pleased at some time with well-put flattery, even though the lie is apparent? In the Irishman Lil found a congenial spirit; one who seemingly understood her, who could talk with her in her own way, and occasionally drink with her.

"You're a terrible big eater, Tim, for a man of your size," exclaimed the woman, with a side-long look at him.

"It's yerself that's standin' there so pretty loike wid the red in yer cheeks that's encouragin' of me!"

"Now, Tim!" she expostulated as usual, standing erect and brushing back the wisps of hair from her face. Tim eyed her gravely as he finished his last doughnut and settled back against the wall for a comfortable smoke.

"I ain't a sayin' that yer beautiful or anything near it, but to me yer good lookin', an' you can bate any round-up cook in the country! That's what you can do! If I had a wife loike you, I'd be a happy man. Not but what yer as

well off as it is, but I'd sure be appreciatin' such a person as yerself!"

The Irishman lighted his pipe. Lil slowly took up the last of her doughnuts, a thoughtful expression gradually settling upon her face. She smiled grimly as she shoved the pan of grease to the back of the stove to cool. When she had packed the doughnuts away in a three-gallon crock, she walked over to where Tim sat and stood before him a moment in silence.

"Tim, you're a pleasant man to get along with," she began. Then after a short pause, in which the Irishman removed his pipe from his mouth and looked at her inquiringly, she continued, "I've known you fer a good many years, an' in all that time you've treated me like a lady. *Other* folks ain't always done that. But I ain't complainin'. It don't always happen that folks are meant for each other, an' if they don't pull together it's always been my idea that they ought to quit right there. Not but what George an' me get along all right ordinarily, — it

ain't that, but I reckon if I hadn't had a pretty temptin' amount o' money, he wouldn't 'a' been so dead set on marryin' me. Now, with you it's different. Money don't cut no ice with you. It's me you like, for you ain't never seen a cent's worth of my money. But I've got some salted down. 'Bout fifty thousand odd dollars. It's always been my idea to get in some town an' start in the liquor business, but I've never dared hint about it to George. That ain't high-toned enough for him, — sort o' out of his line. It's natural for me to take to that because my folks made their money that way; an' there's lots of money in it. You know that because you've been in the saloon business yourself. Now, I may take a notion in my head to break loose an' go my own way. Are you in with me on it?"

"Wid me body an' soul, me darlin'!" exclaimed Tim, dropping his pipe and taking one of her hands in both his own.

"Well, I ain't ready to go yet, so leave go o my hand!" she remonstrated.

"Wid me body an' soul, me darlin'."

[redacted]

"Cruel, cruel! Why, I could hold that till the river freezes over! An' I swear I'll be that thrue to yez all the days of me natural loife that" —

A sweet girlish face, framed by the small open window, looked in upon them, interrupting the vows so neatly spoken. The woman drew back into the room, embarrassment expressed as plainly as any feeling could possibly be in her voice and in her manner.

"Well, land sakes! You're just in time! I've got some mighty fine doughnuts here. I was just agoin' to put them down cellar. Come right in, an' get some."

Marjie laughed softly. That was one of her traits. If she realized the situation, her looks did not betray the fact. She answered quickly, —

"Oh, thank you. May I bring a particular friend of mine in to the feast?" Without waiting for an answer, she disappeared from the window, and the two occupants of the kitchen heard her speak to some one outside the house.

Then she came in, closely followed by Taggie.

"We're both nearly starved!" exclaimed Marjie, placing a chair for her companion, and seating herself in another. "Starved and tired! A most terrible combination. We've been riding all day, and never saw a thing except two wolves and one coyote. The wolves got away, — in fact, they were away and had sense enough to stay away. But the coyote! I don't think that it will feast on any more innocent lambs, — at least not until it is reincarnated. I suppose it will be a wolf next time, and its taste for lambs will have developed into something higher and bigger, — calves and colts and full-grown steers. It was Prince that came in at the finish. He took that coyote right by the side of the throat, shut his jaws, and swung it right up over his head. It never stirred. Then I informed Taggie that she could turn around and look because it was all over."

"But I can't help it!" exclaimed the younger girl. "I can't bear to see such

awful things. It's bad enough to watch the dogs chase the poor thing for two or three miles. I suppose I *am* a coward."

"No, it shows only that you have a kind, tender heart, and I love you for it. But these doughnuts are simply delicious, and Lil is fixing us a regular feast, — milk and chicken, and that elegant butter. Come, get yourself a plate and sit up to the table."

"You didn't see George anywheres when you was ridin' around, did you?" inquired the woman as she bustled about bringing dishes from the cupboard to the table.

"No, we did not," answered Marjie. "Did he go to the hay-camp?"

"Yes, I reckon he went over there to pay off some of the men. Hayin's about over."

"Haying is over and the summer is nearly gone! Can it be possible? It won't be long now before Kitty comes home, and then good-by to the mountains! Oh, I have had such a glorious time, haven't we, Taggie?"

"I guess I'll simply die when you're gone," sighed the girl.

"No, you won't anything of the kind, because I have your mother's and father's consent for you to come and stay with me the greater part of the winter. We are to study hard, you know, and learn all sorts of things, — and make the world happy for Kitty and the babies, and for ourselves, too. Then next summer, — but we'll let next summer take care of itself."

Taggie's eyes filled with tears. She took one of Marjie's brown hands from the table, and kissed it impulsively. "I didn't think they'd let me. Why didn't you tell me before? Oh, I'm so glad!"

"I just wanted to keep it until you began to bemoan your fate and worry over my departure."

"It isn't every one that's blessed wid the long head loike yer own, Miss Margaret," observed the Irishman at this point.

She turned to him coolly.

"That may be as you say, but I've

never yet planned ahead as far as the length of my natural life, as I have heard of other people doing."

Tim made no answer to this thrust, but reached for his hat, got up slowly, and walked to the door. When he reached it he turned about and remarked, —

"I ain't a questionin' yer statement, but what I've got to say is this, — that it won't be long before *yer're* makin' calculations on the balance of yer loife, an' if ye ain't mighty careful you'll be drawin' a losin' card." With that he left the house.

Marjie's face clouded over for a brief moment while she studied thoughtfully, then brightening, she remarked to Taggie: —

"Do you think a person can make a mistake in marrying the man one loves, knowing that the man has a noble nature, and loves deeply and truly in return? — providing, of course, that one has the chance of marrying this same man?"

"I think I'd take chances," answered Taggie with a sudden blush.

"But I'd hate awfully to have to propose to a man," said Marjie absent-mindedly.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE STREAM KEPT UP ITS LOUD COMPLAINT.

A FEW days later Marjie received a letter from her sister informing her that the young baby was now old and strong enough to endure the journey back to the ranch, and that they would in all probability return within a week or two. "Then," she concluded, "I will be once more with my sweet Marjie, thoughts of whom even the care of my new baby cannot efface from my mind for a single hour. How I have missed you, — yet how happy I am!"

In that way the young mother wrote to her sister.

Something like a shadow crossed this sister's face. She began to figure the

days upon her fingers. Then a sudden shame took possession of her. She kissed the letter passionately, and throwing herself upon the bed buried her face in the pillows.

"I will be counting the hours next, and then I will be praying for her not to come back so soon! How shameless I have grown! And to what end is all this? That I should forsake my sister and her true affection to be near this man — this boy that I love! Just to hear his voice and wonder if, after all, I have been mistaken, — to wonder if he still loves me! If I cared less I would know, but I cannot tell, — I cannot tell!"

In this manner had her heart ofttimes cried out.

His Highness had grown to be a strong, well man, but not a week had passed that Marjie did not ride up to the Retreat. Very often they met alone and had long, quiet talks together, yet not once did the man betray the weakness that he had shown during his illness.

"When you are well and strong, I will not be so particular."

The words ofttimes occurred to Marjie with a mortifying effect. She would have given much to have been able to unsay them or forget them.

It was the afternoon of a warm day in September when she received this letter from her sister. It aroused her with a shock from the lethargy of a drifting life, along which she had allowed herself to be carried during these last weeks. The awfulness of her future suddenly confronted her, and she threw herself from this useless, ineffectual dreaming with all the energy and force of her being. In Marjie that meant much.

She determined to ride at once to the Retreat, just why, she would not tell herself, but a dozen things intervened to delay her. First came Lil with so much ready news and gossip, gathered from the man who had brought the mail out from town, that a half hour elapsed before the girl could find an effectual excuse to withdraw. Then Howell came up to

the house, leading her horse, and with his usual solicitude, asked her to go out for a ride and get a breath of fresh air. She could not very well refuse, so an hour was passed in riding around the cattle to the south of the ranch. When they returned, they found Jerry and the girl, Taggie, waiting in front of the house. The two young people stayed the remainder of the afternoon, and at Lil's urgent request, remained to supper. It was late when, accompanied by Marjie, they rode away toward Winter's ranch. At the forks of the road Marjie laughingly bade them good-night and rode on. The words that she had contrived to whisper to Jerry rang continually in his ears.

"Do not hurry, please. I am going to see His Highness."

The boy could not understand why she had taken this sudden notion. To his certain knowledge she had never been in the Retreat in the evening except when Ike was wounded and they had taken that mad ride together. The thought

filled him with uneasiness, but to him her word was law. So he talked with Taggie at her father's new fence for a long time, forgetting in the girl's presence some part of his fears.

Marjie rode on. It was quite late when her horse, with the assurance born of familiarity, made its way through the gap of rocks. A few steps farther on, a man came toward her from out of the darkness. She knew him at once. She would have known him had she not in the faint light seen the outline of his perfect form.

He walked up to her and laid his hand upon the bridle.

"What brings you here?" he asked, something, to her, indescribably sweet and tender sounding in his voice.

The girl leaned toward him that she might see him more distinctly. His face told her nothing, — but his voice — ! Ah, that she might accept the impulse that urged her to a certain boldness!

"You," she said quickly, before her spirit should waver. "Why else should

I come? Besides, I leave the mountains soon. Will you pardon such indiscretion?"

"What have *I* to pardon?" There was a queer fierceness in his tone. Marjie laughed softly and laid her hand very near to his own upon the horse's neck. How much the night seemed to tell her!

The man beside her could almost feel the hand so near to him. Never since the days of his illness had he touched it, or taken it within his own. He could see the coaxing face bent down above him, and a maddening impulse came to take the hand — herself, into his arms. A quick breath in the darkness, and he stepped away from her. She sat still for a moment, filled with a wild impulse to flee, to ride away through the night and leave him forever. Suddenly she slipped to the ground and walked over to the bank of the stream. There she stopped for a moment and looked down into the sparkling water. He was by her side instantly.

"What is it you want? A drink? Wait, I have a cup near by."

He quickly procured a cup, filled it from the creek, and offered it to her. Their hands met. The water spilled between them, the tin cup fell jingling upon the stones at their feet, but they did not hear it. — The girl was in his arms.

The thin ice of his reserve had broken through. He had come to himself, — to his own, and in the one brief hour that followed they lived a lifetime.

The hour went by. The world held but these two, this one starlit night, and their great happiness. The little creek murmured dismally, but they did not hear. They lost all count of time, — of everything but their love as they lingered there upon the embankment, but still the stream kept up its loud complaint.

The splashing of water near them, followed by a bird-like whistle, brought them back to a sense of reality. Jerry rode up beside them almost instantly, and the silence which followed proved the uncomfortable embarrassment of

them all. Marjie was the first to recover.

"Since it is so late, I suppose I must ask one of you to go home with me."

"I will take your horse, Jerry," quickly spoke His Highness.

The boy did not speak, but dismounted and handed the bridle-reins to Ike. He stood silently by until they were ready to go, then he remarked:

"I reckon you won't need my spurs. Good-night!"

Later, when Ike returned, Jerry was outside waiting for him. The boy did not speak to him when he rode up but silently took the pony and went off with it through the bushes to its stake-rope.

When he returned, His Highness was sitting outside the cabin, smoking and watching the stars in the gray-blue heavens. Jerry, still silent, walked past him into the cabin. The dreamer outside took little notice of the boy's restless footsteps as he paced back and forth in the small kitchen.

For more than an hour the boy walked

about like some haunted soul, and the man dreamed. At length, Jerry touched him upon the shoulder, and the man, still enwrapped in his exquisite thoughts, looked up at him.

Jerry was visibly agitated. Even in the dimness of the light that the lamp in the room cast upon him, he looked pale. He began to speak, then hesitated and began again; — this time in a sudden burst of words.

"I don't suppose I've got any right on earth to tell you what I'm agoin' to, for I think more of you than I do of anyone; — but I've just got to say it!" He stopped an instant. The man looked at him with curious expectancy. The boy went on: "I suppose I hadn't ought to 'a' seen what I did to-night, or to know what I know. I had a sort of idea that you cared for her, for I couldn't see how you could help yourself. I might 'a' known she'd like you, too, — but I never thought you'd let yourself make love to her! What are you goin' to do about it now? You goin' to marry her and bring

her here, to this hidin' place? Are you goin' to make that girl an outlaw's wife? Why, she might better be dead an' done with it! She's been everywhere an' had everything all her life, an' she couldn't rough it like we do, no more than anything! You'd be just diggin' a grave for her. She'd die a worryin' about you a hidin' here! Howell's in love with her, and I'd rather see him get her, mean as he is, than to have you bring her here to this life!"

The face of the man had grown deathly pale and drawn in the dim light. He held up his hand for the boy to be silent. Jerry was startled at the sound of his voice.

"You've said enough. I am fully awake. At least you might have let me dream for one night. — That was the first. It will be the last if it eats out my soul and breaks her heart!"

Then he laughed in a harsh, strange manner, and walked out into the night.

CHAPTER XXV.

AN ODD ELOPEMENT.

WHEN Marjie walked out into the sunlight the next morning, no thought of a possible sorrow came to her, nor even the slightest foreboding, so happy was she in the sweet newness of her love-dream, which held her enthralled in its embrace. She sought a secluded spot, there to be apart from all the world and dream its sweetness over and over again.

A secluded spot on this particular ranch was not difficult to find, but a bower of roses or a vine-covered arbor, both fitting backgrounds for such a mood and such a scene, were unheard-of luxuries in this out-of-the-world country.

But Marjie Navarre did not require a background otherwise than the sunny

corner of the log house. True, there was the brush along the creek, and in the distance a lone pine-tree stood out in the rocks, high up on the side of a butte; but this girl, in a heaven all her own, had no thought of things earthly.

So she lived and dreamed and thought for a time; but the dream ended, as it always does, though its fragrance remained.

The coarse voice of the woman, Lil, came from around a corner of the building, bringing Marjie back to things material somewhat abruptly.

"Why, here you be, sunnin' yourself, an' I was thinkin' you was in bed asleep, though I don't see how anyone can sleep as late as this! Ain't you hungry? Breakfast's waitin'. George, he rode off early an' he ain't been in yet. But he's comin' now, over there by the sheep-shed, so you can eat together. Kind of keep each other company. I'm givin' things a good diggin' out this mornin'. It needs it bad enough, but I ain't got

much more to do. Come on in an' begin. George'll be here in a minute."

The woman stepped away from the side of the building, and shading her eyes with her hand, looked from one end of the mountain valley to the other.

"This is a pretty fine lookin' ranch," she said at length, as she turned about and followed Marjie along the side of the house. "I don't see how it is I never noticed it so much before. When George an' me first settled here I thought it was the prettiest place I'd ever set eyes on; but somehow I got used to it an' never thought no more about it."

A look almost pitiful came over the woman's face. But Marjie, walking on ahead, did not look around. When they reached the door of the kitchen, the woman paused, and again surveyed the surrounding country; then hearing Marjie's low laugh, she turned and entered the house.

"My, you have been making things shine!" exclaimed the girl. "I don't like to walk on this floor, it's so clean;

but someone will have to make a beginning. Why, what have you got the cat tied up for? Pussy, what have you done to deserve such a fate?"

Lil, pretending not to hear, made no reply, and Marjie never gave another thought to the circumstance until later that same day. She had gone with Howell to drive some cattle across the divide. They were returning when Marjie, who had been unusually silent all the morning, burst out suddenly into a hearty laugh. Her companion smiled and watched her in wonderment, as he always did when she changed quickly from one mood to another.

"Well?" he questioned.

"I was thinking about the cat. I wonder why Mrs. Howell had it tied up. Didn't you notice it? Yes, it was tied up by the neck. Perhaps she is breaking it to lead!"

"Umph! I shouldn't wonder!" he exclaimed. "That's her one earthly possession that she adores."

When they rode nearer to the ranch

Howell pointed to the house, remarking:

"Someone's there. I see a spring wagon up in front."

"Oh, I wonder if it can be — if it could be Tom and Kitty, or someone for me?" cried Marjie with unconscious distress in her voice.

Howell looked at her closely.

"You don't want to go," he said with sudden narrowing of eyes, and the hand that held the rein grew unsteady so that he rested it upon the pommel of the saddle.

"Oh, what am I to say?" exclaimed the girl. "I do not want to go, yet you must not think that I am sorry because they are coming home, or may be there now, if that should be they. I simply hate to leave. The mountains are very fascinating!" She laughed softly.

"And the people?" questioned the man at her side.

"The people?" Her eyes softened wonderfully. "Yes; you are right. It is the people, or rather the *person!*" She could not keep her own secret. If she

had realized the happiness that filled George Howell's heart when she spoke those words, she would unhesitatingly have told all her secret. With a sudden impulse to learn if the team at the ranch was meant for her, she rode quickly forward. The man, who had longed for an opportunity to tell her of the passion that filled his life, followed close behind, unable to say the words which were burning within him.

An astonishing surprise awaited them. Before the door of the ranch-house stood Howell's own wagon, to which a large work team that Lil called her own, was hitched. Upon the high seat sat Lil, serene and ponderous. Howell's eyes opened in wonder as he took it all in with one glance, then riding up alongside, he asked sternly:

"Well, what's up now?"

"I'm up," responded the woman, drawing the reins up tighter above the horses' backs. "An' I'm waitin' for Tim to get up so's we can move along. I'm goin' to town."

"It looks like you intend to stay for some time, by the things you've got packed in that wagon," said Howell coolly.

The woman laughed hilariously. Evidently she had been drinking. She leaned over slightly as she spoke.

"Well, yes, I reckon that's about what I intend to do. I thought I needed a change, an' you know changes is something my family is kind of addicted to. I thought I'd get away before you folks got back because partin' is always sad business, but Tim's slower'n molasses in January. Come along here, Tim, or I'll go off an' leave you, an' then you'll know what'll happen! Come on, nobody's goin' to hurt you!"

The Irishman peered cautiously around the corner of the house, and seeing nothing to alarm him, walked boldly up to the wagon, remarking as he clambered in beside the woman:

"I'm obeyin' orders, sirr!"

"Shut up," exclaimed Lil. "Just pull that cat up to the front here under

my feet, so's I can keep my eye on it," she demanded, whipping up the large horses which started lumberingly away.

"Good-by!" she called, turning laboriously about, and waving her hand at Howell. She had not so much as looked at Marjie.

The girl had dismounted. Her horse, turned adrift, grazed near, while she stood facing the mountain that loomed between her and the Retreat.

She did not conceal her abhorrence of the whole episode, and still continued silent as the pair drove away.

It was all ridiculous in the extreme, but to Howell it was a sudden release from his wretched existence. To Marjie much of the tragedy was lost sight of in her keen sense of the ludicrousness of the situation, but her disgust was none the less apparent.

In the man's heart lay a deep reason for his relief in the woman's leave-taking of the home that she had occupied for so many years. It may not have been a relief to Lil to leave the husband that

she had apparently loved, but no trace of regret showed in her fat, placid countenance, as she urged the horses to a faster gait, and left behind her forever the scene of half her life.

Marjie was gazing straight ahead, strangely silent, the expression of her face hidden from Howell. After the wagon had passed through the gate, he turned to her, saying huskily: —

"Why don't you speak to me? Why don't you say something? Do you hate me because such a thing has been forced upon my life? — a fitting culmination to these disgraceful, hellish years? Such a humiliating disgrace! Do you despise me because in a weak moment I married such a woman as that? My God, girl! I am humbled enough! Why don't you speak to me?"

She turned to him like a flash, holding out both her hands.

"No, no, I do not think that! I don't despise you or hate you. I am so sorry for you, — and for her! I think I understand perfectly your weakness in

marrying her, your sin in living with her, and the unhappiness of your life. I am sure that I understand, and I am so sorry for you! Words of mine cannot help you or benefit you. Your old life has ended, — a new one has begun, and I pray that it may be a happy one, — that you may grow better and stronger, and deserve all the blessings that life can give. — This ends my summer. After all, I have been happy here. The end would have come doubtlessly within a few days, and a few days can make but little difference in one's life — and happiness, and I am so happy! I pray that you may be just as happy."

Howell had taken both the hands she gave him within his own, and still held them. She looked at him with deepest sympathy shining from her beautiful face. Little she knew the extent of his passion. His voice shook with it as he spoke.

"Your happiness means more to me than anything else in this world. I am ashamed to say such things to you now,

— it is too soon. But sometime, when this thing is settled and forgotten, when I have grown to be a better man, I am coming to you to ask for the greatest thing this world can possibly hold for me. Do you know what that means?"

She drew her hands quickly away, and standing erect before him, looked at him with a strange, startled expression in her eyes.

Wrapped in her own great love, she had lost sight of the truth that had once dawned upon her, the truth that Howell cared for her in a way that was appalling, to say the least.

She did not hesitate or flinch as she spoke the words that shut all thoughts of happiness forever from him, and killed every germ of manliness in his nature.

"I have given you my pity, — deep from my heart, and I feel for you a kindness, — almost an affection, born of this same pity, — but I cannot give you my love, — now, or at any time, because that love is not mine to give. I already love, and I am so inexpressibly happy that

even this new trouble of yours cannot dim it. Why, it makes me happy even to say the words, 'I love him'! And you must learn to be happy, too. I should have told you before."

A look of horror came over the man's face and grew as she continued: "It is all true — and wonderful to me. I love His Highness, as you call him, — Jerry's friend. That is all. You must try to be glad for my sake, and forget what you have said to me, or would say, — overcome it and be happy. It seems to me that the whole world ought to be happy now!"

Words sprang to his lips, but he could not utter them. He turned and walked unsteadily away from her, leaving her with the sun shining upon her upturned face, and the happiness singing in her heart.

CHAPTER XXVI.

WHEN ALL THE WORLD WENT WRONG.

MARJIE hastily packed her belongings. The sorrow of leaving her new happiness gradually came over her, but the fact that Ike loved her, as she realized and knew that he did, made life a grand and glorious thing to her, obliterating the pain of parting that must come that day.

While arranging her possessions in movable order, she decided that the best thing for her to do under the circumstances would be to get Taggie to accompany her, and go directly to the ranch below, there to await her sister's return, which would be but a few days at the most.

But first she must see His Highness. Certainly he would never forgive her if she went away without seeing him, and

she could never forgive herself. So that one point was settled in her mind. She would see Ike as soon as possible, and leave later in the afternoon for the ranch below.

The horse she had been riding that morning belonged to Howell. Her own saddle animal was feeding in the small pasture. She would get it in and saddle it as soon as she finished packing.

Fortunately for her plans, Jerry rode past the house a few minutes later, and she called to him from her window.

He turned his pony about and rode slowly up to the house, reaching the door just as Marjie hurried out to him.

"It is lucky you happened along just now! I am in a great dilemma, in which only you can assist me. Why, what is the matter, Jerry? Are you sorry because I am going home to-day?"

The boy's face had grown old and worried since the previous day, and although Marjie's brain was filled with new, strange thoughts and a strong undercurrent of excitement, yet she noticed it.

Jerry looked startled at the announcement, and replied: —

"I didn't know it. What are you goin' so soon for? I — I'm sorry. Has your folks got back?"

"No," she answered slowly, "but you see Lil has gone away, — to town, and so I must go home. Oh, if you knew how sorry I am to leave! We've had such a good time, haven't we? I can't realize that I am really and truly going; — and to-day, too!" Then she continued, shaking back the hair from her forehead and laughing softly; — "But perhaps I may come back some day if" — A faint flush crept over her face, she hesitated in her speech, then taking a step forward, laid her hand upon Lady's sleek neck, and looking up earnestly at Jerry, went on: "Jerry, I want to see him — His Highness, before I go. What am I to do? Couldn't you ride up there with a note for me? I have no one else but you! You'll do it, I know. I won't be but a minute writing it!"

She did not wait for his reply, think-

ing that he would gladly do this for her.

It was true he could not refuse to comply with her request, yet he recoiled with pain from the thought of seeing the thing through, and waited stolidly in his saddle many minutes for the note. Every moment since the night before he had been reproached by his conscience. By what earthly right had he taken it upon himself to dictate or meddle in an affair that did not concern him? He asked this of himself many times, and a great fear of the consequence grew in his heart. Why could he not have kept his mouth closed? Yet he thought at the time that he was doing right. But if he was to see this girl suffer one pang of unhappiness, he would pay most dearly for his interference.

All this and more passed through his mind as he waited. Finally, after what seemed to him a very long time, she came out, a look of assurance and relief upon her face.

"Put it in your pocket carefully, — so,

and bring me an answer soon. Be sure that you wait for an answer, for that is the most important part! How good you have been to me, Jerry!"

"Don't," he exclaimed, wheeling his horse quickly about.

She watched him for a moment as he rode away, then she returned to the house.

"Something is wrong with the boy to-day," she thought, "and something seems wrong with every one, except with us and our great love. But that cannot go wrong because it is everlasting!"

Jerry had not seen his friend since the previous night, but he felt sure that he would find him up at the Find. He went directly there. Somehow he could not give the whistle signal, and so with scarcely a sound of warning, walked up to where the man was at work. He stood directly before the stooping man before he knew of his presence, but His Highness did not start or change expression. He had no fear of any living

thing now! Jerry tried to speak, but failed completely before the cold, clear eyes of the man. Then he fumblingly drew the letter from his pocket and handed it to him. He turned suddenly about when he had done so and walked some distance away. Finally he found his voice, and called back that he would wait at the cabin for the answer. Ike made no reply. With a white face and wild-beating heart he stood there, holding the missive in his hand.

It was a little note, so filled with the fragrance of the girl's own sweet soul, that the man who read it felt a pang worse than death. She wrote: —

"I do not know how to head this, — my first letter to you, so I will start it abruptly, — just as we began our real life, you and I, — for I cannot remember the beginning of our love, can you? It seems to me that it has been always, — just as it will continue for time without end. And, oh, I am so happy! So happy that a somewhat serious difficulty that has just presented itself seems insignificant. I am obliged to go home to-day! So I write this that you may come to me, or arrange

that we can see *each other*, which sounds better.

You have weakened my patience, so hurry to

MARJIE."

When he had read it he wept, as only a strong, tender man can weep, but in his tears he found no consolation.

Later he returned to the cabin and gave Jerry the answer, written upon a scrap of newspaper. Then without speaking, he turned and walked back to his work.

Jerry rode slowly down through the gulch. The little piece of paper, placed carefully inside the pocket of his shirt, seemed to drag down upon him with the heaviness of a rock.

When he reached the ranch, Marjie ran to meet him, holding out her hand with a shy little laugh for the note. The happiness in her face smote the boy to the heart, and he thought to ride away before she had time to read it. A great fear stole over him. Instead of acting upon his impulse, he sat there powerless

in his saddle, while she laughed softly and turned her back to him as she opened the scrap of paper.

It seemed to Jerry that she stood there for hours. Something in the expression of her shoulders and back made him realize the agony of the moment. She seemed as though turned to stone.

The time could not have been of long duration, yet to Jerry it seemed endless. Suddenly she turned about and faced him. She was white with a strange pallor. Holding out the paper, she said in a voice grown strange:

"I wish you would read it to me. I don't think that I have it quite right."

He looked frightened and as he spoke his voice shook.

"I don't think I've got any right to read it. I don't want to!"

"Read it to me!" she commanded. The strength of her will compelled him. He took the paper in trembling fingers and read:

"In answer to your note, which has just reached me, I must say, that after duly consid-

ering everything, I have decided that it is better for us to part, — forever and completely. I thank you for bringing into my life a ray of happiness. This is absolutely decisive. That you may soon forget a man unworthy of you, is the prayer of

AN OUTLAW."

The note fluttered from the boy's nerveless fingers to the ground. Marjie stooped and picked it up. Folding it carefully she placed it inside the bosom of her dress.

A strange calm came over her which frightened Jerry and filled him with wonder. She patted the neck of the small gray pony and talked to it in a low voice. Then kissing it in the center of the forehead, bade it good-by in a voice calm and sweetly contained. Stepping away from the pony, she said:

"Good-by to you, too, Jerry. This afternoon I ride to Tom's place. I wish you would see Mrs. Winter for me, please. Tell her that I am alone and ask her to allow Taggie or one of the other girls to come down and stay with

me until my sister returns. I will send up one of the men from below to get my luggage, and she can ride back with him."

Without waiting for a reply, she walked down to the field where her horse was picketed.

Jerry scarcely knowing what he was about, turned his pony and rode slowly away. He had not the courage to stay longer, to hear her speak, or to see again the strange look upon her face.

When he reached the crest of hill, he turned around in his saddle and saw her riding swiftly away from the ranch.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THEN CAME WINTER.

AFTERWARD Marjie never could remember her ride from the ranch in the mountains to the prairie below, but throughout her life she never forgot the anguish of that one afternoon. The memory of it haunted her with nightmare effect, even when other trials should have banished it forever from her mind. But one never forgets the first great pain, because, ever, it is the hardest to endure.

Sometime, in nearly every human life, comes a heart tragedy, worse than death at its worst. Mortal words cannot express it or describe it, but a mortal heart can understand it and a living, suffering soul can feel it.

When Marjie began to think clearly and to reason she was appalled at the

utter hopelessness of her life. It seemed to her that she had never really lived before this love came to her, filling her with its wonderful force. Now that she had lost it, how was she to exist the balance of her life? Perhaps this question which she asked herself served as food for more deliberate thinking than she had yet allowed herself. At any rate, it partially lifted the curtain of darkness that enshrouded her soul and let in a little of God's own sunshine, clearing the mist from her mental vision. Then came Hope. It is never far distant from youth.

Before two days had passed, Marjie Navarre had made up her mind that life was, after all, long, that she would yet learn more of the truth, and until she had done so, she would never despair or cease to hope.

Finally, after weeks, she took out the little note and read it over and over again, until she fancied that she could read the man's strong love between the piteously cruel lines.

The day after Marjie returned to the lonely ranch on the prairie, she sent the wagon to the mountains for her luggage, and also a note to Mrs. Winter, requesting the company of Taggie. The note was unnecessary, for before the wagon had reached its destination the young girl passed it, riding her Dandy at a reckless gait toward the home of her lonely friend, — poor Marjie, to whom this isolation was a blessing.

Marjie received her sweetly, as usual, but a certain shadow of her grief fell upon Taggie, whispering to her young heart something of the misery and something of the cause. But she asked Marjie no questions, though longing to do so, and life went on with its usual smoothness until the return of the family a week later. Then the sweet-voiced Kitty and the happy little ones brought a change that was acceptable to both girls. It gave them something more to think about. Not that Taggie was particularly unhappy, yet it was a continual pain to her to see Marjie bravely

attempting to conceal the anguish in her heart.

The young girl had good eyes. She was not far wrong in her surmise of the affair. Many times she had seen Marjie ride up in the mountains beyond the Howell ranch. Once in her own travels she had met face to face the man that she knew instinctively must be His Highness, whom Jerry had so often mentioned. In her mind she had formed a romantic connection between this grand looking man and the girl she loved so well. That was after she knew that she had no rival in Marjie. Jerry was also in trouble; Jerry, the boy whom years of separation had not weakened the childish affection that she had felt for him, when children together they had played in the woods behind her father's shack. When the boy's father took him away did she not weep for days in the little arbor that they had built? And did she not still treasure the little candy heart that the boy had once given to her? But when he went away she dared

no longer mention his name, so the child suffered in silence.

Jerry's father had been suspected of belonging to a gang of horse thieves, and in that locality, at that particular time, nothing more disgraceful or low could have been conceived. It is doubtful if old Hendricks ever was guilty of this one accusation, but being a man of fairly good judgment, he took his boy and disappeared from the neighborhood.

Winter was a poor but respectable pillar of the place, and at that time was acting as deputy sheriff. His hatred of horse thieves in general and a suspect in particular was as great as it was narrow-minded. After Hendricks's abrupt leave-taking, his name was a forbidden topic in the Winter household. So little Taggie brooded and mourned in silence, and did not forget the boy, even after many years had passed.

Marjie's friendship to Jerry had somewhat weakened old Winter's dislike, for Margaret Navarre was a sensible young woman, with a good bank account of her

own, which somewhat influenced his opinion of her judgment. At any rate, Winter had a secret liking for the young man which his so-called pride,— namely obstinacy, made him conceal with considerable gruff grumbling. Then the boy's father was dead. That altered the case somewhat, but even the son of a suspected horse thief was abhorrent to him. And his girl liked the boy! It was all exceedingly unfortunate, yet it would be too bad to acquaint such a nice girl as Margaret Navarre with the boy's antecedents. So he concluded to say nothing, for it might be possible that she had some knowledge of his past history. When Marjie suggested that Taggie should spend the winter with her, he readily consented, for would not that take her away from Jerry? That was the one thing to be desired.

If Taggie's heart was somewhat heavy now, the children soon changed it all. Those children! Were they not the dearest, sweetest things that ever breathed? She asked each member of the family

that question a dozen times a day, and certainly they agreed with her.

It was not long before the young girl became more contented and happy than ever in her previous life.

Finally, when Marjie began to hope, she, too, was not so wretched, and the months of winter passed over her slowly, leaving an added grace and beauty to her character. Of her face, what can be said? A description would fail, just as it fails to paint the beauty and fragrance of Nature's choicest flowers.

During the long, cold winter she saw little of the mountain people. Occasionally George Howell would stop in on his way to and from town, and twice Jerry found his way down to the ranch on the prairie. The troubled look gradually left his face, for to him Marjie appeared singularly happy and contented. And Ike? — Had he not returned to his old self and manner again? Perhaps, after all, he had not done so wrong. He began to think that things had turned out for the best.

How Marjie's heart burned and longed to question him about His Highness! But she could not bring herself to do so, and Jerry seldom mentioned his name.

It was toward spring when the news came that Howell had secured a divorce. It was justifiable, and the sympathy of every one in the country was with him.

Poor Lil! The height of her ambition had been realized, and a new saloon in a railroad town was headed with her name, and managed by her Irish partner.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THINKING THINGS AND DOING THINGS.

"IT is not so much what one thinks as what one does." Marjie's soliloquy was aloud. She seemed regardless of the fact that two listeners raised their eyes from their books and interestedly waited for her to proceed. After deliberately threading her needle and taking several stitches in the baby's short frock, she went on: "And there is far more satisfaction in 'doing things,' than in 'thinking things.' Most people just 'think things' which is bad and avails nothing, and consequently deserves no praise. It is so easy to think, ordinarily no trouble at all. But every one that 'does things,' no matter how great or small, noble or wicked, deserves credit for the very move which carries humanity along in its

natural trend. I have thought long enough. So long that I am stagnated, saturated in the mire of stagnant thoughts. Now I am going to do something."

"I don't quite understand your drift, or your logic, either, but may I ask in what direction your ambition is about to lead you?" quietly asked her sister, while Taggie closed her book and looked in a puzzled way from one to the other.

"That's just what I haven't quite determined," answered Marjie. "First, I am going to finish baby's dress. Isn't it a dear?— Then after that I am going to do the first thing that presents itself. But it will have to *present* itself, for I am done with thoughts and thinking."

"Then allow me to suggest that you get out and take a walk. It'll do you good, and you won't have to think, either, if that's what's worrying you," suggested Tom Howell, as he turned over on the sofa for another nap, rattling the papers that thoughtful Kitty had spread over him to keep off the draughts.

"Do let's go, Marjie!" implored

Taggie. "I saw two kinds of wild flowers this morning, and I know we can find a lot of them! It's just fine out, an' the snow's most all gone!"

Her enthusiasm had the desired effect, for Marjie sat bolt upright and laid her sewing on the table.

"I'll do it," she exclaimed. "We'll walk and walk, — ever so far, and never think a single thought! I will leave this until I come back. — Baby doesn't need it, anyway. Don't worry, Kitty, if we are not back before supper. We will leave Tom to his peaceful slumber, with you for his guardian angel. Come on, Taggie."

Kitty watched them from the window for some time, then she turned to Tom, who was but half asleep, and said: —

"Marjie is not herself to-day. Haven't you noticed it? Not only to-day, but for several days she has acted queerly. Do you remember I thought she was very unhappy when we came home last fall? But later on she seemed to be her own bright self. Perhaps it is just restlessness.

It can't be that she has met someone whom she loves as I loved you, dear. If that was possible I could account for her actions."

Kitty was right. Marjie *was* restless,— more than restless. The madness of the early spring had crept into her veins, filling her with unrest and wild impulses. She felt this afternoon that she could walk to the end of the world. At the rate she traveled up the road, poor, quiet Taggie thought that she must soon reach it.

Marjie had forgotten to talk, had tried not to think, but her cheeks were aflame from the fire within her.

Finally the younger girl stopped short in the road, venturing to remark : —

" I'm not a race horse ! If we keep on we will soon be up in the mountains at Howell's ranch. Oh, Marjie, I wish we were going there ! "

" Why, you poor little girl," exclaimed Marjie, coming back to her side and putting her arms about her. " I believe you are homesick ! "

"Yes," assented Taggie, half sobbing, "I believe I am. Couldn't we go a little farther an' then we'd be there?"

Marjie laughed softly.

"We would only have about fifteen more miles to go. Just as you say.—But perhaps we'd better turn back now, and wait until to-morrow to go to the mountains. What do you say?"

"Oh, Marjie, Marjie!" exclaimed Taggie as she clasped her arms about her friend, "you don't mean it! To-morrow! Why, I was just joking. I'll never be able to sleep a wink to-night! To-morrow, an' I'll see my dear daddy, and my mother again! And — every one else! Oh, Marjie, I'm so happy! I can dance! And a minute ago I thought I was too tired to go a step farther. How good you are!"

"That will do, dear," remonstrated Marjie, laughing softly to hide the tears that would come. "If I had known how very much you wished to go, we would have gone before; — yet this is the first fine weather we have had."

Marjie had not made up her mind before that she could ever return to the mountains. Now that she had done so she felt something very near like happiness. Already her restlessness was gone, and much of the madness with it, while a certain feeling of excitement predominated. She was like a child once more, with the queer pain of expectancy in her heart. That night she could not eat her supper, but she laughed and chatted as she had not done in months before. When she told her sister that they intended to ride to the mountains the following day, Kitty felt glad that she had at last found something to interest her, and entered most heartily into the project.

That night it was Marjie who did not sleep. She had been up late, finishing the little frock that she had been at work upon during the day. It was very late when she laid it tenderly away among the baby's dainty wardrobe.

All the household had long before retired when Marjie tiptoed quietly to

the room which Taggie occupied with her. She walked over to the girl's narrow bed, and smiled when she saw her so fast and contentedly asleep. But no sleep came to her. It is one thing to say a thing and another to do that same thing. She could no more help thinking than she could help breathing, for her brain was active, — too active.

In the night the wind whistled shrilly around the corners of the building, and Marjie lay shivering in her bed, fearing that a storm might come to prevent them from going to the mountains, and to — His Highness.

Now that she had actually made up her mind, it seemed to her that she must go, — that she would ride through snowdrifts as high as her head to get there, or through blizzards and storms of the worst.

She wondered if the wind whistled as loudly about the cabin in the Retreat, — if His Highness heard it, — if he, too, lay awake and thought. Then she shut her hands and teeth fiercely and suffered it all over again.

This was as it had been during every other windy night, and calm night, too, throughout the long winter.

Hers was but the common tragedy of the human heart, which one meets at every turn in life's pathway. So common and ordinary is it that it excites little comment, yet there is nothing worse.

CHAPTER XXIX.

AN INTERRUPTED GAME OF POKER.

THE next morning a thin coat of white snow lay over the country. The wind, still whistling about the buildings, brought with it a few scattering flakes which it gracefully tossed and piled into small, white drifts, along with the old diminished and dusty drifts of the winter. In the mountains the snow fell heavier, and the drifts, old and new, were deeper. At George Howell's sheep-ranch everything proceeded with its usual monotonous regularity, regardless of the weather. The large bands of sheep, each driven in different directions, were now, at ten o'clock in the morning, out of sight of the ranch, quietly and diligently pawing aside the soft snow for the tender bits of green grass which the early spring had

brought forth; — the tender young grass, which when a chinook has swept and melted off the snow, sets whole bands of sheep crazy, — likewise the herders.

Down at the ranch, at ten o'clock, the cook had just thrown out his dish-water, making a gray, greasy, sloppy spot in the white snow. After surveying it for a moment, though it is doubtful if he noted the effect that he had wrought, he turned about and quickly entered the house, holding aloft the dripping dish-pan as he went. George Howell stepped out of the door-way as he bustled into the dingy kitchen, for cooks everywhere have the right of way.

"Looks like winter'd set in ag'in," he remarked, as he hung his dish-pan, still dripping, back of the cook-stove.

"Yes," assented Howell, removing his pipe from his mouth, "but it won't last long. This ought to make fine hunting. Seems like some of you boys would get out and rustle a little venison. It would taste pretty good for a change, for we haven't had any for a month or more."

"I was just a-thinkin' that I'd go out an' try my luck at chickens. There's a whole flock of 'em down by the lower shed. Looks to be 'bout a hundred in the bunch. If they wasn't so all-fired lazy up above they'd bring us down some grouse. That's the only thing worth eatin' this time o' the year." Then Kid Cory stretched his slender height in a hearty yawn.

"Grouse may be all right, — I ain't denyin' it, but most any kind o' fresh meat 'u'd taste good 'bout now," said the cook, with a side-long look at his employer which he caught direct.

"There isn't a mutton on the place fit to kill," declared Howell. "If you fellows want fresh meat just get a move on you and go out and hunt for it, or else content yourselves with ham and bacon."

"Well, if I had a little more ambition, I'd go," said Kid. "But I'm kind o' hankerin' after a little poker. How does that strike you, Howell?"

Howell made no answer to Kid's question, but it reached him, for he began

nervously walking back and forth through the room, puffing most vigorously at his pipe.

He was still striding about, silent but thoughtful, when a deep, rich voice outside brought him, together with the other occupants of the kitchen, quickly to the door.

"Hello! Any one at home?"

"Lord, it's His Highness," exclaimed Kid, stepping back into the room.

"Yes, what of it?" inquired the man, dismounting from his horse. "We are all friends here, are we not? Here is some venison which I'll give you for a drink of whiskey."

"Wait a minute," called Jerry, riding up at that instant. "I'll help you down with that fellow. Ain't he a big one, though? We got him about two miles back in the gulch. Well, now I could 'a' helped you!"

"It's just a feather-weight," said His Highness, lifting the great buck down from the horse as if it had been a sack of flour.

The man was strong with the strength that hard toil, exercise, and the healthful air of the mountains give to men. Howell and the others looked at him admiringly. Perhaps they could have done it also, but not so easily or so gracefully. They admired his great strength while they feared him.— They feared the man, himself,— his intellect and his quick, decisive speech. He knew this and it amused him ; — yet he wore his chains with no lighter heart in consequence. But they had one thing in common,— the love of gambling.

This day a game was soon started and each man, for the time being, forgot his troubles in the excitement of the betting.

At five o'clock in the afternoon they were still playing. His Highness, oddly enough, was losing. The others, somewhat evenly divided, were winning.— An exciting game that gave promise of extending into the next day.

But at five o'clock, Marjie walked quietly into the room. Consternation reigned for a moment, but no one moved

except Howell, who overturned a chair as he rose to his feet.

"Don't let me interrupt you!" exclaimed the girl sweetly. "Go on with your game. I will make myself at home. Really, I have already done so. Jerry took care of my horse."

"Well, this is a surprise! You're the last person in the world I expected to see to-day!" exclaimed Howell.

"Nothing is wrong. Don't be alarmed," Marjie said. "I rode up here with Taggie. Jerry went on home with her,— has taken her home. I waited in the kitchen until I was warm. But I don't want to interrupt you. Do continue, or I shall feel that I have taken a wrong moment to come here. I have already made myself at home. Do go on with your cards."

"Well, are you going to quit?" inquired His Highness at this point.

"Of course he isn't," answered the girl. "Why, what a pile of money! This will be a rare chance for me to learn the game. If you don't mind I

will watch you for awhile. Please sit down and go on with it."

"Yes," said His Highness, "we've waited long enough. Can you open that jack-pot?"

Howell took his seat and picked up his cards from the table. After glancing at them quickly, he said:

"Well, I guess I'll open the pot for what's in it,—sixty dollars."

Marjie stood between him and His Highness, and looked with seeming interest from one hand to the other.

"What does it take to open a 'jack-pot'?" she inquired.

"A pair of jacks or better," answered Howell, as he watched Kid Cory and his brother drop out. His Highness held up his cards.

"I'll stay and raise you forty," he said.

The faces of the men were expressionless.

"I'll see you forty," said Howell. Then he discarded.

"How many do you want?" inquired the dealer.

"Two," answered Howell.

"One," said His Highness shortly, at which Howell looked up at him quickly, trying in vain to study his quiet, expressionless face.

Marjie looked into his hand. He held nothing but small cards and no pairs. She did not understand that he had drawn to a "bob-tail flush" and caught a card of another suit. That was beyond her knowledge of the game. As the betting progressed she felt a horror in the belief that he was trying to cheat Howell. She had never learned that deceptions are honorable in this so-called game of "bluff."

Howell held three kings and felt confident.

"Well, it's up to you, Ike," he said, as he looked at his three kings and the two useless cards that he had drawn.

"I pass," answered His Highness, in the same quiet tone that he had used throughout the game.

"Well, I'll bet you two hundred," said Howell confidently, pushing it upon the pile in the center of the table.

"I'll see you two hundred and go you five hundred better." A slight, almost unperceivable expression of confidence had crept into His Highness's voice. Howell hesitated. Ike either held fours, a full-house, or he had drawn a flush, — any of which was better than his three kings.

"Take the pot," said Howell. "I guess I've played enough for to-day."

The men got up from the table, Ike with a feeling of relief. Marjie had been so near to him that the folds of her heavy gray skirt touched him. If it had been her soft arms he would not have felt more insanely mad, more truly unnerved.

Outwardly he was as calm and unconcerned as though she had been on the other side of the world. His expression had never altered since he had first become aware of her presence in the room. Every thought had seemed concentrated upon the table before him.

How could she know that his love was almost maddening him?

CHAPTER XXX.

THE SACRIFICE OF A CHARACTER.

THE poker players moved away from the table. Two of the men went out of the room, eager to straighten up their tired bodies. His Highness placed his winnings in his pocket, and without so much as glancing at Marjie, followed the men.

Marjie went up to him, abruptly breaking off her conversation with Howell, leaving him standing alone near the table. Ike had reached the door which opened into the kitchen, when she laid her hand upon his arm with a motion to detain him.

He turned about and faced her, sternly erect, and still without a change of expression. For an instant her courage failed, and she made a quick, almost

unperceivable motion to draw back from him, then quickly all the pride in her nature flew to her assistance, and she raised her head and spoke to him as she would have spoken to Kid Cory.

"Jerry took your horse and rode home with Taggie. He asked me to tell you to wait until he returned, — that he would be back directly. It is time now that he came so you won't have long to wait."

Howell walked past them out of the room. He had some work to do, — besides he remembered what she had once told him. When had he ever forgotten it? But the man went no farther than the dimly lit kitchen.

Marjie ceased speaking and stood quietly waiting for Ike to go. He made no move but stood there, mute. Then the mask fell from his countenance, and he looked at her as she dreamed and knew he had looked that night under the stars. The faint color fled from her cheeks. She stood there, trembling. For an instant the past months seemed unreal.

She was back in the Retreat under the star-lit canopy of a summer sky,— a girl untouched by sorrow.

Yet in another instant she recalled what followed with a force astonishing. She remembered the anguish of the awakening and the suffering of months. This man had taught her the power of love, and then, forsook her, — worse, had passed it off as lightly as if she had sung him a song or entertained him pleasantly. Clearly and quickly such thoughts passed through her mind while she stood there waiting for him to go. At length he spoke : —

" Are you going to stay here long ? "

When she answered him composure came, and her tone was much the same as before.

" A few days, I think. I am not sure. It depends upon Taggie. I don't want to take back a homesick girl."

" But you don't intend to stay *here ?* "

" Why not ? I stayed here before. Was the woman, Lil, any protection to me then ? " Her voice had grown sharp.

"You know best," he said quietly, "but I would rather — Why don't you stay with your friend?"

"Taggie? There is no room for me there. They haven't room enough for themselves. Is there any particular reason why you do not wish me to stay *here?* Do you consider it indiscreet or unladylike? I am sure I appreciate the interest you take in me!" She spoke sarcastically. "Perhaps you would like to have me stay in the Retreat!"

His face flushed darkly.

"I wish you good-evening," he said, and turned away. Marjie took a step toward him.

"Wait," she cried, with all the remorse of her soul sounding in her voice. "Wait until I tell you! Oh, I didn't mean it! I never thought when I spoke,— and you had made me so wretched, — so bitter! I am so sorry! You know I would not, — could not think *that!* Won't you tell me that I am forgiven? Oh, I've been so wretched and unhappy all these months! It all

came to me as I stood here,— all that I've suffered, and it made me bitter and sarcastic; — but I've never lost faith in you, *never!* I still believe in you,— just as much as I did that night,— that last evening. What made you do it? Our love meant everything to me, — I should not have been afraid of *anything* — with you! Anything would have been better for me than this, — loving you so! Turn around and tell me that you understand,— that you do not mind my foolish words, — that I am forgiven! — Why won't you speak to me? Oh, can't you see that my brain, — my heart cannot endure it? Speak! — If there is any man in you, speak to me!"

Then he spoke; and his voice sounded strange, but he did not turn around to her.

"That is it. There is no manhood in me. You were perfectly right in your first assertion. I *would* prefer to have you stay in the Retreat. Indeed, I would be very kind to you for a few days. Can you not come to gratify my whim?"

If she could have seen his face, her own might not have become so startled or so ghastly, for his was like the face of a corpse.— But he kept his back to her as he spoke those lying words which he thought would kill all the love and respect that she had ever entertained for him.

"Think it over," he added, "and let me know."

She was white to the lips.

"I have no need to think, and only this to say: I hate you, despise you now, as much as I ever fancied that I loved you! I hope I will never see your face again!"

"Well, perhaps you will change your mind about that proposition sometime," he said as he walked blindly away. With a quick, unconscious motion he tore from his neck, a bright red silk handkerchief, throwing it down upon the kitchen floor as he went out. The veins of his throat seemed bursting.

Afterward he wondered how he had said those words to her. He never re-

membered how he walked through the dark kitchen out of doors, — or how he took Jerry's horse and rode back to the Retreat.

Sitting near the door was Howell, and he had listened to every word that had been spoken. After Ike rode away he stooped over and picked up the red handkerchief from the floor, putting it carefully in his pocket. Then he went to talk with Marjie.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE VICTIM OF CUNNING.

HOWELL found the room empty. Marjie, nearly distracted, stunned, and too wretched for the sight of human eyes, had stolen away. She had locked herself in the room that had been hers. Howell possessed too much discretion to follow her there; but he sat down in a chair that she had leaned against, and figured out a plan of action.

To him, the battle seemed half won. Ike had already caused his own undoing. But a woman's heart, — and such a heart, could find excuse for more than that. He reasoned that, later, when she had thought it over, she would see that the man had sacrificed himself to save her from a miserable existence; — had tried with one stroke to put an end to her

love. Marjie was a bright girl. He felt sure that she would soon figure it out. The only thing now for him to do was to convince her that Ike was really the villain that he had represented himself to be.

Howell was never without resources. He could not have been the adviser of the band of outlaws that he was, making money with astonishing rapidity, if he had not possessed the art of cunning. In this case he would require help. His men, — he knew them. They were faithful enough through necessity, — doubly so if they caught the sight of money, and for this they should have it in plenty.

Since they had proved reliable in other affairs, he decided to turn to them and present the case in such a fashion that they would undertake it. He half looked for failure. If it came he would lose all, but what harm could come to him through the helpless girl? If he won, — he must win! She was well worth the attempt.

He sat in meditative silence for a long time. Finally Jerry hurried into the room, interrupting his chain of thought.

"Where's Ike? I've been using his horse."

"I believe he's gone back," answered Howell, without moving from his comfortable position in the chair.

"Well, now that's funny," said the boy. "I thought sure he'd wait till I got back with his horse, for he don't like ridin' mine, noway. Where's Marjie? I've got to give her a message from the Winter girls before I forget it all. My, but they can talk! They just about ate Taggie up when she got there, but I suppose they'll all be havin' her wash dishes for them in the morning! That's the way it goes. It's a wonder what that poor kid takes from them. The snow'll all be gone in the mornin' except in the drifts. It's chinookin' to beat the band. I see the sheep below has just turned into the lower shed."

"It must be warming up considerable," said Howell.

"Yes, a whole lot; but I reckon the girls had a pretty cold ride. Strong wind a blowin' in their faces all the way up. Has Marjie got warmed up yet?"

Howell rose nervously from his seat.

"I'll see," he said quickly, and went over to the door of Marjie's room.

"What is it?" she inquired in response to his knock.

"I was wondering if you were cold. I'll have a stove put in there and a fire started at once." His voice was filled with solicitude. It touched her at that moment deeply.

"Thank you," she replied. "I will be out in a moment." Then Howell went away to make arrangements about the stove.

When Marjie came out of the room a few minutes later, she found Jerry, who had heard her voice, waiting for her there.

"It *is* rather cold," said the girl. "And I did not realize before how tired one's first horseback ride of the season could make a person. I think that I

shall be very glad to get in bed early to-night."

"You do look about fagged out," he said sympathetically. "Taggie got home all right and her folks are mighty glad to see her, — an' I reckon she was about as glad to see them. Her sisters told me a lot of things to tell you for them: — they'd fix up a bed for you with Taggie if you'd come there an' stay with them; — to thank you for takin' such good care of her all winter, — an' a lot more, but I can't remember which one said which. Oh, yes, I 'bout forgot; — Mrs. Winter said to tell you if you wouldn't care to come there an' stay, that she'd expect you there to dinner to-morrow, anyway. She'd look for you sure."

"Thank you, Jerry, for remembering so much. I will surely go up there to-morrow. Didn't you get an invitation, also?" He laughed heartily.

"Not that I know of," he answered. "But I guess if it wasn't for the old man a standin' around, that I would 'a' got one, though. You ought to 'a' seen him

look at me when I rode up there with Taggie. I reckon he thought for a minute that I'd eloped with her! But I just went right in the house an' got warm. I wasn't cold, though, such a short ways. But the old lady asked me in so I thought I might as well go.

"You never heard so much jabberin' and talkin' in all your born days, as those old maids got off. Just jabbered all the time. I'll bet Taggie wished she was down below again. I hear the cook in there puttin' grub on the stove. I guess I'll wait for supper. Ike's run off with my horse. I don't know what's got into him. He tried this new one of mine just once, an' then he swore that he'd never ride the thing again. I reckon he must 'a' took a notion to go pretty quick or he'd never gone off on that horse."

"I told him what you asked me to," quietly said Marjie. Then with a wonderful change of voice and expression, went on. "Don't he really like your horse? — And wouldn't he *naturally* ride it? Oh, I might have known! — I —

Oh," — Then she laid her head on the table and sobbed softly.

Jerry was too embarrassed to speak. He could only stand nervously fingering his hat and watch her.

Presently she raised her head and laughed softly, just as suddenly as she had broken down. It was something to discover that the man she loved was a hero instead of a villain! For the time being Marjie was the same happy girl that she had been the previous summer.

After supper she was left alone with George Howell, and the man's acuteness soon brought him to a conviction that Marjie had already reached a happy conclusion in regard to His Highness. This was directly against his plans. He decided to make arrangements immediately to bring things to a focus.

Marjie preferred to go to her room instead of talking with George Howell, but there seemed to be no alternative.

During the course of their conversation she asked him questions about the poker game that she had witnessed that

afternoon. He took the cards and explained and illustrated the game to her. Finally she asked: —

"Can you tell me how a hand of small mixed cards could possibly beat three kings?"

"It could not," declared Howell. "Was that the kind of a hand Ike held against me?"

"I — am not sure," she replied nervously, falling suddenly into a deep study.

"Well, if that's the kind of a hand he held up, he cheated, that's all!" exclaimed Howell. "But that's nothing for that fellow. He's a noted cheat and gambler, — and a lot worse than that. He's the sleekest liar that ever came to the country. I'm glad to notice that you've got over your liking for him. I'd told you last fall but, — well, I thought you'd get over it right away, and generally a person isn't thanked for meddling in anything like that. But I know the fellow, and I think you'll take it kindly when I warn you to look out for him.

If he makes a false move about you, it will be the last of a long record!"

Marjie got up unsteadily, saying in a voice pitifully soft and quiet: —

"You are very kind, I suppose. I don't quite understand. My brain has stopped working, I think. I am very tired to-night. Good-night."

CHAPTER XXXII.

A QUEER KIDNAPPING.

MARJIE'S brain must have been very tired that night or she would not so readily have accepted Howell's version of His Highness's character. It was also tired the next day, and she made no attempt to think.

There was no reason why she should doubt Howell's word. She had always liked and trusted him. It was the manner of the man to appear candid and truthful. His frank, open demeanor had kept the public eye of suspicion away from him for many years. No one dreamed that he was the connecting link between the outer world and this band of outlaws who were doing their unlawful work in such a mysterious manner. Not even Howell's own brother knew

of it, — but then Tom had not lived in the country very long. It was not surprising that Marjie in the numbness of her grief trusted him.

During the morning of the next day she was unusually quiet, and, compared with her normal bright self, appeared almost stupid. At the breakfast table she mentioned that she intended to take dinner at Winter's ranch. Howell looked up quickly, lamenting that he would be unable to accompany her there, but added: —

"You are such a thorough little Westerner that I have no fear for you in daytime anywhere."

"I suppose that I am not wise enough to feel fear," she replied. "I don't believe that I was ever really afraid of anything. But out here where no one lives there is no danger. I wouldn't like to take you away from your work, and I am sure that I shall enjoy my ride alone."

"Well, I will come up there and get you after supper, — about nine o'clock,

—will that do?" Howell asked nervously.

"Perfectly," replied the girl. "You are very kind, though I assure you I am not afraid to come home by myself. It isn't any different now than it was last summer, is it?"

"But I wouldn't think of letting you," exclaimed Howell. "I'd never forgive myself if anything happened to you!"

It was nearly noon when Marjie rode up the lonely road toward the Winters' home. Their ranch had been completely fenced since the fall before, and now the only way to enter the place was to go up within a quarter of a mile of the old deserted cabin and take a short cut through a brush-covered gulch. The cool, sweet air refreshed the girl and was balm for her tired brain and wounded spirit. A tiny breath of peace touched her soul. She allowed her horse to walk along, and occasionally it would jerk down its head and nibble at the short green grass along the trail, as she mused silently and unmindful of her surround-

ings. Once she realized that she was humming some light air, and it gave her as much of a shock as it would had she caught herself laughing at a funeral. But was not this the funeral of her own best self? Down through the gulch the new road was not so well worn but that she was obliged to duck her head to avoid the leafless, switch-like branches of the willow brush, yet still she meditated and dreamed. Presently, however, a sudden shying of the horse threw one branch directly in her face, and before she could recover herself or clear away the brush from her eyes, a stern voice commanded: —

"Hold up your hands!"

She felt her horse jump backward, frightened at the grasp of a strong arm. Before she had time to comprehend the situation, she was seized by a masked man who appeared, phantom like, at her side. Her hands were fastened securely behind her back and a bandage tied over her eyes. — All this in the face of a gun held by the man in front.

For one moment she was actually frightened, the attack had been so sudden and complete, resistance altogether impossible. Then she found her voice. "Well, are you going to kidnap me?" There was no answer. Her horse began to move slowly. She could not tell whether she was going on or turning back, and began to wish most heartily that George Howell had been with her. What could these ruffians intend to do with her? She had heard of people being held for ransom, and as the thought took shape she felt that just now she would willingly give them all her wealth for her freedom. In her excitement she had, for the first time, forgotten her trouble."

"Say," she ventured again, "if you will tell me what you want with me, perhaps we can settle this thing now. I am not enjoying myself particularly well! How much do you want to let me go?" Still no answer.

On they went, traveling very slowly. Now she felt that they were taking her

over the road she had just traveled; next they began to climb a steep hillside, and she knew they were going in the direction of the old cabin. What were they going to do? She felt sure that she ought to laugh, it was so ridiculous to kidnap a person in broad daylight! Yet she could not laugh. Then she remembered, and made up her mind that it mattered little now what became of her. But she was curious to learn her fate. The silence of these kidnappers irritated her beyond endurance. Again she spoke: —

"Now, see here! Be reasonable! A moment ago I would have given you all the money I have in the world, which is considerable more than you ever saw! But now I wouldn't give you more than a thousand dollars for my release, possibly two. In another minute I won't give you ten cents, for I am beginning not to care. So if you expect to get anything out of this, you'd better speak up quick!"

"We had orders not to speak," said a muffled voice in the rear. "But if you

make any noise, you'll git yourself in trouble!"

"Well, I am not likely to waste my voice on empty mountain tops," she returned. "But I'd feel very grateful to you if you would tell me what you are going to do with me."

"Wait an' see!" growled the man behind.

"Oh, there is a chance of my seeing, then, is there? I'm glad to find that much out, for this thing hurts my eyes! You've tied it on too tight!"

When they climbed the hill and journeyed on for a short distance, Marjie was lifted from the horse, and half carried, half pushed, was forced into a building of some sort. She heard a door behind her forcibly shut and barred, and then the quick galloping of horses which soon died away in the distance. She was left alone.

She was not sure that she was absolutely alone until by dint of rubbing her head against a projecting log, she pulled the bandage away from her eyes. A desolate room containing a box or two, a few tin

dishes, a bunk, and the dead ashes of a campfire met her sight. The shack was without a window, but light in plenty poured in through great cracks where the chinking had fallen out.

Where was she? It could not be the old deserted cabin, for the roof of that, as she plainly remembered, had partially caved in. But what other old building could it be?

She struggled awhile with the thongs that bound her hands together, but it was useless pulling and resulted only in red wrists and swollen hands. So she sat down upon one of the boxes and considered, but without result.

Where could she be? There was only one old cabin anywhere near; of that she felt positive.

An extra sized crack drew her attention. She got up from the box, and going over to it, looked out upon the sunlit hills. The scene was very familiar. It *was* the old cabin, but patched until it was scarcely recognizable.

She felt glad to know where they had

imprisoned her. There was a chance that some one might possibly be going by that way before night and she could easily make herself heard. The thought consoled her and she found herself thinking more rationally than she had done for some time. If only Jerry would happen along! — Or Ike! What wouldn't *he* do to those men who had treated her in this manner? — But Ike was false! — No, he was *not* false! Not if all the world said so, — not if he, himself, told her so a thousand times! — She would not believe it!

In her new difficulty she turned instinctively to him with all the confidence of a child. She hoped that it would be he, not Jerry who might come and rescue her. After all she did not mind this adventure so much, — if only Ike would come, and if she could but release her hands. How they hurt!

Then she went about the room searching for a knife or a piece of tin, — anything that she could insert in a crack of the wall and rub the stout cord upon.

Something red lying near the door attracted her attention. She moved it with her foot and found that it was the bandage that had been tied over her eyes. Something familiar about it made her examine it closely. She gave a low cry, and stooping down upon the floor, raised it up with her teeth. It was the handkerchief that she had tied over His Highness's shoulder when he had been wounded, and which she remembered to have seen about his throat the evening before. Her own initials were embroidered in one corner.

She dropped it upon a box and tried to spread it out before her, but it was so knotted that she found it impossible.

How did it come there, — and around her eyes? She could not think, but it seemed a comfort to have it near her. It was almost a small part of Ike.

After a half hour of steady, hard work, she succeeded in wearing out upon a sharp jutting log, the stout cord that bound her hands together. Then with red, trembling fingers, she untied the

knots in the red silk handkerchief and spread it out upon her lap. Something was tied up in one corner. She wondered what Ike could have placed there. — Perhaps some money. Ought she to open it?

She hesitated for a time, alternately looking at it and then jumping up to see if any one was coming to her rescue. What if she could not make herself heard if some one did pass that way? The thought was horrible. She began to feel as she remembered to have felt in some dream or nightmare, long past, when in the grasp of some terrible danger she had tried to call out but could not make a sound. Then she tried her voice to make sure that she could use it, and the sound of it startled her. She became more nervous each moment and finally, just to give herself something to do, she untied the knot in the corner of the handkerchief and looked to see what Ike had fastened in it.

A bit of torn paper, carefully folded to make it small and compact, was what

met her gaze. She opened it carefully, and there scrawled in what looked like His Highness's hand-writing was this message: —

"I will come for you before dark. I am sure that you will have come to my way of thinking by then.

IKE."

Then it was that all hope fled, and in her despair only death seemed gracious.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

RESCUED BY HER CAPTOR.

LONG before dark came the quick beats of a horse's hoofs, and then a man stopped before the old cabin and at once unbarred the door, but the almost insensible girl huddled in one corner did not hear or care.

Howell raised her tenderly in his arms and cursed himself for not coming sooner. He thought at first that she was unconscious, but she pulled herself away from him and sank down once more into the corner like some wretched, abused animal.

"You didn't need — to bother," she said, her lips blue from the cold.

"My God, to think I've let you come to this!" He was half-crazed by the sight of her suffering, and taking her up

in his arms, talked frantically for a while. But she only half understood, her soul being elsewhere, seemingly.

Finally, after much coaxing and some forcing, Howell managed to get her to swallow some whiskey. It warmed and partially revived her. Then he made her understand that one of the "gang" had disagreed with His Highness in regard to payment for the work, and had brought the news to him. He grew eloquent, and told her how much he loved her, how miserable life was without her, and much else, as he helped her upon his horse, and leading it, walked rapidly down to the ranch. There *was* a slight chance that His Highness or Jerry might find this out. He thought best to make haste, and his judgment was not at fault.

The jolting of the large horse did more to bring Marjie to herself than anything else. Just before they reached the ranch, she looked down and said in something of her old manner: "I suppose you want me to marry you, and

perhaps I should, since you have saved me from — this. Well, all right. I have no love to give you. You deserve to be loved rightly, but if you want to take chances with me, why I'll marry you. Only it would better be at once, for I am apt to change my mind." In this way did Marjie consent.

Howell tried to induce the girl to rest that night at the ranch, but she refused absolutely, saying: "No, I go back to Kitty to-night. To-morrow you can take me to town and have this thing over with. Probably I am doing wrong in marrying you, but you say that you are too miserable to live, anyway, so it can't make much difference to you."

It was quite late, so Howell lost no time in hitching up a team to a light buggy and they were soon speeding down out of the mountains to the ranch on the prairie, which they reached late in the evening to the intense surprise of Kitty and Tom Howell. Marjie wasted few words in her explanation of their sudden appearance, and concluded: "We

are going to town to be married. That is all."

Kitty was at first incredulous, then hysterical, and for a time her talk to Marjie was quite incoherent.

The weary girl was the only contained one among them. When she removed her wraps she went into the bedroom to look at the sleeping children. Kitty followed her, still weeping, and the girl quietly drew her into her own room, closing the door that she might not waken the little ones.

"I'm all right now, Marjie, but I never will get over the shock, — never!" said the little woman, rocking herself vigorously backward and forward in the small rocker. "I can't understand it! Why did you do it?"

Marjie with stiff fingers was unlacing her shoes and giving short answers to her sister's frantic questioning. She was nearly undressed before Kitty noticed what she was doing. "Why, you are not going to bed without your supper, are you? What in the world is the matter with you?

Marjie, I know something is wrong! — I know it! — I believe you are not right!"

Marjie's strange manner quieted her instantly. "I am not hungry. I don't want to eat, — not anything; — only to *rest* and *rest* a little while," said the girl softly. Kitty became thoroughly frightened.

"Margaret Navarre, something has happened to you! I am never going to consent to this thing until you are yourself again, — never! You shall not marry the man! You can not!" Kitty insisted.

"Your own brother-in-law, Kitty. — Why not?" asked Marjie wearily. "There is nothing in the law to prevent it. He has had a proper divorce."

"No divorce is proper!" exclaimed her sister. "If you were in your right mind you wouldn't think of it. It is disgraceful! He is old enough to be your father, — and you don't love him, either!"

"No," agreed Marjie, "I don't love

him, poor man; but I believe he loves me. You will go to town with us, won't you, dear? And wake me real early, please." She slipped into her white bed without saying her prayers, which impressed Kitty more than ever that something was wrong with Marjie. She hurried out to the kitchen to prepare some tea, and when she returned with it, the tired girl was deep in sleep, — the sleep of exhaustion.

In the morning, Kitty was more than ever convinced that something was wrong, though to be sure Marjie felt better and tried to affect a certain brightness which her colorless face and dull eyes made indescribably pitiful to behold. Kitty was assisting her with the finishing touches of her impromptu wedding toilet, when she suddenly exclaimed: "Marjie, what is the matter with your wrists?"

"My wrists? I hadn't noticed. The wind is very cutting; I must have forgotten my gloves." But Kitty was not satisfied, though in the excitement of seeing her off she forgot the circum-

stance. The little woman had wept all night, and in the morning was quite too ill to take the journey into town. But Tom went with them and saw them married.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A RECKLESS RIDE AND THE STORY OF THE DAY.

JERRY had been riding all day. Late in the afternoon he approached the Winter ranch from a northerly direction, and acting upon a sudden impulse, rode up to the house to see if Marjie was still there. If she had not returned to the ranch, he thought his chances very favorable that he would get to talk with Taggie, — for Marjie was a great manager.

It was Taggie who ran out to meet him when he rode up to the cabin. "What have you done with Marjie?" she demanded.

"Marjie? Ain't she here?"

"No, she didn't come. I've been looking for her all day, an' I'm terribly wor-

ried. I walked half way down there a little while ago, — an', Jerry, I'm scared to death! I found *this* on the road." She took from her pocket a much bruised and crushed mask. "I haven't showed it to anybody, but I've just been crazy for you to come so's you could explain it to me."

He took it from her outstretched hand and looked at it closely, then demanded sharply: "Where did you find this?"

"Up in the gulch where there's an opening in the brush. It was half mired down in a horse's track. I got so scared I didn't go any further."

"I'm going to look this thing up," said Jerry, turning his horse quickly about. "I'll be back after a while."

His manner frightened the girl, and a strange foreboding grew in her heart.

"This is one of the Cory boys' masks," said Jerry half aloud. "I'm just goin' to find out what they're doing up here. This is a little out of their trail." The young man closed his lips firmly and pushed on. When he reached the small,

open space in the brush, he found the place where Taggie had extracted the mask, — and he found more ; — he found the hoof marks of several horses and the track of men's boots in the soft earth. A short distance farther on, in the thickest of the brush, he found Marjie's cap, and a small, filmy handkerchief.

For a time he was overcome with fear. He was panic stricken. Scarcely realizing what he was about he raced his horse madly to Howell's ranch. When he reached there no one was about, not even the cook. There was no sign of Marjie anywhere about the house, although some of her belongings were scattered in her room. He waited there a short time, almost maddened by the thought that something had happened to her. Then unable to endure it longer he mounted his horse and rode recklessly up the road toward the Retreat.

Near the old cabin he met Kid Cory riding leisurely along the road. Kid would have passed without a word, but

Jerry rode up in front of him, and with an oath told him to stop.

"Don't get on the prod, Jerry," he sneered. "What's the matter?"

"Yes, that's what *I* want to know! What *is* the matter? What's happened to that girl?" Jerry demanded.

"Well, it's His Highness, not you that ought to git on his high-horse about that. Keep your shirt on!" Kid had watched Howell and Marjie ride away from the ranch not an hour before, and in the absence of his "chief" felt secure in saying what he liked. He went on: — "I'll tell you all I know if you git away from the front of my horse. I went away last night so I wasn't consulted on this here deal. *I'd* never 'a' done it, because I've kind of had my eye on that girl myself, and if I'd ever had a chance, you bet His Highness wouldn't 'a' been in it! But I wouldn't 'a' given Howell that much chance, even if it was to spite His Highness. Anyway, I wasn't consulted The boys has been tellin' me about it and this is all I know. — Howell offered

'em five hundred apiece to kidnap her when she went out riding. It was fixed up to look like it was His Highness's work. They put her in some place or another, or tied her up, blamed if I know which, an' then they left proof enough around to make her think it was done for His Highness. Then Howell's plan was to come to her rescue about — dark, an' win her for hisself through his all-fired heroic act. Better tell His Highness that they've got her cached somewheres, — I don't know where. The boys wouldn't tell because I wasn't in on it. Well, I wouldn't 'a' done it for no five hundred, I can tell a feller that! For I consider the girl worth more than that!"

But Jerry did not wait to hear the last of Kid's talk. He had heard enough. His one thought was to place it all in Ike's hands, and to do his bidding. It did not take him long to find his friend, who was moving about the cabin, preparing a camp supper. He looked up with surprise as Jerry entered, and seeing great

trouble upon the boy's face, asked quickly: "What's happened?"

Jerry burst forth in sorrow, still more than in anger, and in a voice broken by deep emotion told all that he knew of the infamous plot that was planned to wreck the life and happiness of one defenceless girl. As he continued with the few details of the vile scheme, he was carried away, and yielded more and more to the emotion which he made no effort to conceal, — nor could he have concealed it had he so desired.

Through the influence of the dreadful news, Ike had fallen for an instant into a sort of frenzy and mental distraction. Rushing outside he secured his horse which was grazing near, and without waiting to saddle it, rode at a reckless pace down the rocky canyon, regardless that one misstep of the animal might mean death to both. The vile plot of these ruffians had eaten into his soul. Yet the wrong done to him seemed infinitely small compared to the misery that Marjie might now be undergoing. To reach

her quickly, to free her, perhaps to touch her just once and look again into those eyes that told so much, seemed to him a greater blessing than he had ever hoped to possess.

When he neared the old cabin he rode rapidly with head low, scanning the ground as he went. He passed the tracks made by Jerry's and Kid Cory's horses, and saw with one glance how Jerry had ridden up in front of the man to stop him.

Ike knew the hoof track of every horse in the country. In ten years of comparative idleness he had learned much. He stopped abruptly beside the old cabin. There upon the soft earth were the foot-prints of Marjie's bay horse! There could be no mistake. He got down upon his hands and knees and followed the tracks almost to the door. There the tracks of several other horses obliterated them. But she had been there. He threw open the door and entered the dark cabin. At first nothing but the bare emptiness of the room met his sight.

He stood for a moment as though paralyzed. Then he recovered himself, and with minute carefulness examined every portion of the interior. The whole story was written there, and told itself with all its pitifulness to his discerning eyes.

The strong string upon the floor worn in two by friction upon the projecting log above it, the handkerchief that she had given him, and the lying, counterfeit note beside it, the many tracks her feet had made as she walked like a caged creature about the room; and there in one corner was a spot brushed clean where surely she must have lain cuddled. Then lastly Howell's tracks. That was all, but it told him the whole wretched story.

There was nothing more to learn. Howell's plot had succeeded. Marjie had been rescued by her captor. Half-dazed, he mounted his horse and turned its head homeward. He was living without hope, without a morrow, in a darkness without a ray of happiness.

Benumbed, he did not try to find an exit. There was but one for him. Perhaps now in the first shock of his grief, the sharpest misery had not come to him.

CHAPTER XXXV.

JERRY TURNS INFORMER.

"TO think she'd go off an' marry that man," said Taggie. "Why, last summer he had that fat woman for his wife! An' to think she'd go an' do it an' never say a word to me about it, — not a word! I just bet he made her marry him! — Why, last winter after he got his divorce, she refused him point-blank, an' told him never to mention it to her again. I heard it! — and now to think she'd do this!" It was early morning of the day after Marjie left the mountains so abruptly, — the day she married Howell. Taggie was standing with Jerry at her father's fence. During the previous summer it had been the young girl's duty to bring in the cows. It had been her habit to go to the

boundary fence for them. The cows were not always there, but Jerry was, generally. This morning she rode out at daybreak in hopes that Jerry might be there to give her more news of Marjie, the rumor of whose adventure had reached her.

The boy was there before her, waiting to pour his own sorrow into the ears of the girl whose friendship and sympathy had become so dear to him. "There's no use worryin' about spilt milk," he said softly. "It's done, an' that's all there is to it."

"But I just bet he made her," exclaimed the girl between her sobs. "I'd just like to murder him!"

"Murderin's a strong name for it," spoke up Jerry, "but I'd like to take a good shot at him!"

"Why, you feel just like I do about it, Jerry," exclaimed the girl, brightening at once. "I bet anything you think that he made her marry him! Now don't you? I know she liked that big, black friend of yours. I wasn't with her

all winter and all last summer an' not know that! But you're so close-mouthed I can't get a thing out of you! You wouldn't even tell me who owned that black mask I found down in the gulch. Maybe you think I'm a tattle-tale like some girls. Well, you can think what you like, but I ain't agoin' to come out here after the cows any more, — an' I ain't agoin' to meet you *anywheres!* I'm never going to speak to you again, Jerry Hendricks! If you can't trust me, that's the end of it!"

She turned around suddenly and started away. The boy made one stride and caught her firmly. "You ain't agoin' to do nothin' of the kind!" he exclaimed.

"Let go of me! I am too! — An' you can have back your candy heart an' —." Here Taggie broke away from her captor and made a dash with one hand suspiciously like the brushing away of a tear.

"I'll take it back if you'll give me the kisses I gave with it!" he said boldly, again taking her by the arm.

She blushed furiously, and making a weak effort to clear herself, declared: "Well, I like your nerve! You ain't much of a gentleman to talk like that to me! Now, are you?" and she gave him a glance that aroused all the gallantry, all the courage in Jerry's soul. "I don't reckon I am," said the boy gently, still detaining her. "But I couldn't live an' have you mad at me, an' somehow or another I just couldn't help sayin' that to you,— I've thought it so much. You used to kiss me when you were a little tad, an' it always seems to me you ought to now, because I want them more. You're the only person in the world that ever kissed me, Taggie! — I ain't nobody, an' I ain't got anything on earth but my two hands and — a true heart, but I can work an' make something of myself, if you care,— if you won't ever get mad at me." He took his hand from her arm. "I ain't agoin' to keep you against your will."

She walked away a few steps with bent head, then stopped and stood still while

Jerry continued: "I'd tell you everything that I know for I trust you. I'm agoin' away to work somewheres an' when I get to amount to something, I'm coming back again to see if you won't give those kisses back to me."

She turned about shyly and looked at him with brilliant eyes, then with cheeks burning, said timidly, yet with homely, honest ardor: "But you might be gone such a terrible long time,— an' you might meet some other girl,— and — I don't want to take such chances, Jerry!"

Just what was Jerry's verbal reply may not be known, but certain it is that the hazard intimated by the girl was forever obliterated, and that never before had the two young souls been brought so permanently and so nearly together. A few fervent kisses with a mutually affectionate embrace sealed the compact.

Then, as though inspired by the contrast between his own happy betrothal and the wretched experience of Marjie, Jerry rehearsed to the wondering, indignant Taggie the means Howell had used

"An' you might meet some other girl."

to win her,— all that he knew about the whole affair, and all that he had said to Ike the night Marjie went alone to the Retreat. Taggie was horror stricken, and moving away from him exclaimed: "And do you mean to say that she don't know a thing about the mean trick Howell played on her? And she thinks that other fellow's a low down scamp! Well, he's next thing to it, if he *is* your friend!—To throw her over for any reason an' make her suffer like she has! He don't deserve her! But she's got to know the truth, even if she has gone an' got married,— an' you've got to tell her because you meddled in the first place! Yes, sir, it's your duty to go to her an' tell her the whole thing from beginning to end! If you won't do it, I will!"

"I've been thinkin' of it all night, Taggie," said Jerry, "an' wonderin' what's right. I wish I knew!"

"Thinkin'," echoed Taggie impatiently. "Haven't I told you? Jerry Hendricks, if you don't get right on your

horse this minute, and go straight to that poor girl, I'll take back everything I've said to you, an' I'll marry the first man that comes along!" The timid little Taggie no longer existed. There was determination expressed in every line of her face, and her erect little body was an inspiration to effort and achievement.

Jerry hesitated for a moment, pondering deeply, then he went up to her, and taking her hands in his own, said: "I'll do it, Taggie, because you want me to,— but you mustn't say anything like that again." She smiled sweetly, and sure of her triumph, confessed half-coaxingly: "But you know I didn't mean it."

Several hours later that day, Jerry rode into the small, distant town. Marjie was there, but he did not know where to find her, or what excuse to make for wishing to see her. He was never more perplexed in all his life, and did some very serious studying as he rode along. As he entered the town he met one of the "gang" riding out.

"You'd better turn back," exclaimed

the fellow to Jerry. "The sheriff's in town to-day, and a couple of specials, lookin' up that last train deal. It's a little too close for me! They've got Kid. He came in late last night, and they nabbed him. He's given 'em a new name, and swears he's a miner. I'm off to tell the boys. Kind of excitin'. Howell got spliced this morning, but the girl ain't very pert lookin' fer a bride. Better come along!"

"Not just now," replied Jerry, riding on into the town. He tied up his horse, and going direct to the best hotel, inquired for George Howell. He was taking a desperate chance that Howell might see him first, and so prevent him from speaking with Marjie, but there was no alternative, and the news as to the sheriff's presence was a fresh and possibly a valuable resource. The clerk informed him that Howell had just stepped out. Then was Mrs. Howell in? The name choked him. It would do as well if he could see her. Yes, she was in, the clerk thought, and gave him the number of the

rooms. With a brave heart, but some misgivings, the boy went in search of her.

Marjie herself opened the door for him. She drew back startled and surprised. He stood there mute, wondering how he could tell this strange Marjie the thing for which he had ridden so far.

"How do you do, Jerry? Won't you come in?" she said quietly. He stood a moment in awkward embarrassment, then gaining courage, exclaimed: —

"I've got to talk to you. There's something you've got to know! Where's Howell?"

"He is out somewhere attending to some business," she answered. "Won't you sit down?"

"No, I can talk better standin'. I've got to talk quick, too, because it wouldn't do to have Howell catch me here. He might do worse to you than he did when he hired those fellows to kidnap you and make you think it was Ike!"

"What do you mean?" she cried. "Are you crazy, or what, to come here

and add another torture to my brain? I don't understand you. Go away and leave me to my misery, — to the Hell I have chosen!"

"But I've got to tell you," said the boy with tears in his eyes. "There ain't no other way around it. But it can't make you feel any worse to know that it was Howell, not Ike, that played that dirty trick on you. It can't make you feel any worse to know that Howell's the villain an' Ike's the best man in the world!"

"Tell me," she gasped, at the same time taking a strong grip on her emotion that enabled her to listen calmly.

"The first thing to tell you is how I rounded Ike up that night he took you home from the Retreat. I told him how he was about to wreck your life. That you couldn't marry an outlaw, — that you'd die a worryin' about him hiding there. I raved like a crazy fool, an' he got up an' swore that he wouldn't make love to you any more if it broke your heart and ate out his soul. But if he

wasn't broken hearted, no man ever was! He must 'a' wanted to make you believe that he wasn't much good, for there, nights, he'd rave in his sleep till I'd get up an' get out of the cabin. He'd walk the floor night after night, an' he'd kiss that handkerchief that you'd tied round his shoulder, an' that note you'd written, till I thought he was plumb locoed. Then, too, that other night when you come back to the mountains he acted like a ravin' maniac when I come home. Yesterday afternoon when they had you cached in the old cabin, I went to Taggie's, and found you hadn't been there, so I went to look you up. I saw where they'd held you up, an' I found your cap and handkerchief. Ike's got 'em now, an' he don't do a thing but just set an' look at them. Then after I found your things and got scared, I saw one of the gang who was sore on Howell, an' he told me something about it. So I rode like lightning to tell Ike. He was like a mad-man when I told him, and he jumped on his horse and went to find

you and set you free, but you had gone. It's just like this: Howell had you captured, an' then he went an' set you loose and made a great man of himself, and made you hate Ike."

At this the girl dropped upon her knees beside a chair, and with her face buried in her hands listened as the boy went on with his disclosure. When he ceased speaking she looked up, her face transfigured with a great joy.

"Then he loves me!" she repeated to herself. "He loves me!" as if all her world was contained in those few words, as indeed it was.

"I've got to get out before Howell sees me," said Jerry, his hand upon the door.

"Wait," she exclaimed, standing beside him. "I must think a moment. Don't leave me alone with this man! I would kill him just now! — Wait until I think! I must get away from here. Hark! — He is coming now! Pretend something! Anything,— pretend you've brought me a word from Taggie. He might kill you

if he knew! As soon as you've gone I will go away." She spoke rapidly in her intense excitement. "Yes, it is he! Now pretend!"

Before Howell opened the door, Marjie, with a violent effort, pulled herself together. She greeted the man with a faint smile when he entered.

"Here is Jerry," she said. Then, turning to the boy, "I am so sorry that you are in such a hurry. Give my best love to Taggie, and tell her that I may be coming out there in a few days. It was good of you to give me her message!"

"What are you doing in town, Jerry?" asked Howell.

"Oh, I've come to spend my money," and Jerry smiled suggestively. "Gettin' too rich nowadays. Besides, there's a fellow got into a little trouble here in town, an' I thought mebbe I could help him out!"

"You'd better keep out of it an' go home," said Howell gruffly.

"Well, mebbe I'd better," said Jerry, as though he had unexpectedly caught a

glimpse of danger. "So long!" He went out quickly. Marjie's wonderful acting fortified him while it also astonished him. It was perfect. She was always quick to change from one mood to another. He went away with a lighter heart, for he knew that his words had comforted her; and he believed that, fortified by the knowledge she now possessed, she would be able to take care of herself under all circumstances.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

TO THE MOUNTAINS AND HIS HIGHNESS.

HOWELL felt no alarm either at Jerry's appearance, or that of the special officers. Neither was he particularly worried over Kid's arrest. That meant but a few weeks' or months' imprisonment for Kid, and would probably make him more careful in the future. It had happened so before. But he was somewhat nonplussed at Marjie's behavior since the day before. In his dreams he had pictured the blissful happiness that would be his when he had won her. But had he won her? Since her capture she was strangely unlike herself. He felt actually afraid of her, so unlike herself had she become.

When Jerry left the room she appeared to be brighter than usual and more approachable. "I think that I will go

out for a little walk and get a breath of fresh air," she said brightly. "Jerry has brought in a little of the mountain ozone, and I feel better. No, indeed, don't come with me. I want to go alone. You can finish your business about town until I get back." She appeared so bright and cheery that no suspicion entered his mind, so he watched her put on her hat and coat and start out, cautioning her not to be gone too long a time.

Marjie was fairly well acquainted with the small town, and taking a roundabout way, went speedily to the livery-stable, the proprietor of which she knew. She knew also that pretence would be valueless; that it would involve time and explanation, and that quick action was imperative. Luckily he was in his office. She told him in few words that she wanted the fastest and strongest saddle-horse in the stable; that, for a reason of her own, she was running away from Howell, and coolly requested his assistance.

The man was convinced that her

reasons, whatever they were, were good ones, and a great pity arose in his heart for the white-faced girl. He quickly saddled the best animal that he owned, and guiding Marjie to the back of the stable corrals out of sight of the main body of the town, wished her God-speed and watched her until she disappeared from his sight.

The warm sun of the same spring day poured down upon the bowed head of a man sitting in the doorway of the cabin in the Retreat,— a man deep in the unconscious loneliness of despair. A pipe, filled but unlighted, lay beside him ; — a newspaper, unread, was thrown to one side, while with head bent low he sat in absolute silence. Time sped on. It was all one to the man immersed in the infinite duration of utter hopelessness. Finally he raised his head and looked about him. How long had he been there? Hours doubtless, he thought ; — but what mattered it? What mattered anything?

He reached into his pocket, bringing

out a small bundle tied in a red handkerchief. He opened it and spread the contents out carefully before him. A dainty square of lace with an indescribable fragrance still clinging to it, a little white note, and a soft dark cap were the only treasures that he possessed, but to him they seemed a part of Margaret Navarre. And as men sometimes love great treasures, so he loved these. After a while he folded them carefully in the handkerchief and put them away. Then it occurred to him that he must be hungry. When had he eaten? Rising stiffly he entered the cabin and began to prepare a rude meal. What had become of Jerry that he had not seen him all day? He would cook enough for two, for surely the boy would be back that night.

A few minutes later came the sound of a horse crashing through the brush. It was Jerry, of course. He would try to avoid driving the boy away again by his madness. It did not occur to him to wonder why Jerry had not given the

signal; in fact, he had forgotten for the time being that he was an outlaw, hunted. The door opened noiselessly. Instinctively he looked up and saw — Marjie. Before she spoke he thought that he had in reality gone mad.

"I have come to you," she said softly. A great light was in her face. For the moment he was paralyzed, powerless to move or speak. "You must not send me away for I am *so* tired," she pleaded, fear taking possession of her. "You must not! I will die! Take me, dearest, and let me live! Let me live and be with you! It is all I ask, — all on earth I want, just happiness and *you*. You cannot refuse me this!" She held out her arms pleadingly, in utter abandonment.

Then he took her to him, and the force of a vast love condensed within his soul, broke bonds at last in one great torrent, overwhelming and beyond control.

"Then he took her to him."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE BEST HORSE OF A BAD LOT.

HOWELL did not see Marjie leave town, but when an hour or two passed and she did not appear, he began to walk frantically about the streets in search of her. He would walk the length of one street, then hurry back to the hotel to see if she had returned during his absence. This he repeated several times. Finally the suspicion that something was wrong grew to a certainty. It was Jerry's work! Where was he? He rushed excitedly from one saloon to another, but Jerry was not to be found.

Now that Marjie had escaped from him, he was consumed with his passion for her. His one desire was to find her and bring her back again.

Two men who sat smoking in the

office of the hotel watched him curiously from the window. "What in Hell is up?" asked inspector Hill of the county sheriff.

Inspector Hill was one of the posse that was making a desperate hunt for certain desperadoes. He bore proudly upon his vest a large nickle-plated star inscribed in bold letters "Stock Inspector and Detective."

The county sheriff, renowned for many terms of faithful service, leaned toward the inspector with his hand upon his fat knee, and whispered: "Between you and me, his actions *are* dang suspicious! We'd better keep our eye on him. I've kind of had him spotted for awhile back. Guess he knows where we can find our men all right 'nough! But he's got too much backing — public opinion all on his side. It's his money. Might raise a dang big row to pull him without good, substantial proofs. If we could corner him, mebbe we could scare him a little. Might make him show down some cash, or else make him tell what we're after. I'm a little hard up, myself."

"Same here," returned the stock inspector. "Look at there, he's running into the Bucket o' Blood! Now, what in thunder is the matter with him?"

"Let's get up and walk over there," suggested the sheriff. "Mebbe we can find out."

As the two men crossed the street, Howell came hastily out of the saloon and hurried over to the livery stable. The two officers were not far behind, — close enough to hear him say: "I want the best horse you've got, Morris, and I want it quick!" Morris, the stableman who had assisted Marjie, replied: "I ain't got any *best* horse, Howell, but I've got a few poor ones. I'll get you a poor one. Want it saddled?"

"Yes, saddled, and quick, too! No, damn it, I suppose you let out the best one about two hours ago! Don't deny it! There's other eyes besides yours and mine in this town. Don't waste words! Quick, now!"

"I don't know what you're talkin' about, Howell, but as I said before, I've

got some poor horses, and you can have the best of a bad lot."

Howell was a desperate man, and the stableman dared not risk angering him, so he quickly set about saddling a fine-looking horse that was never used except for pleasure riding about the town, because it had the weakness of going lame after a few miles of travel. But for those few miles it was everything that a horse could be desired.

Howell gave the animal an approving look as it was led out to him. He knew a good horse at a glance. "What's the matter with him?" he inquired, mounting the spirited animal. The stableman shook his head.

"Not much good, but he's the best I've got. Don't pay to keep good horses for every Tom, Dick, and Harry to ride!"

Howell was off, satisfied that the stableman did not know a good horse when he saw one. In his excitement he did not notice the officers standing near, but Morris, the stableman, did. "Anything

I can do for you, gentlemen?" he inquired, approaching them.

"I guess not," growled the sheriff, "since you've given Howell the best horse in the stable!"

"Not on your life," laughed the stableman. "That horse always goes dead lame after the first five miles. I've got half a dozen better than that!"

"Then we'll take three," said the sheriff, brightening. "Hey, Hill?"

"Umph," said Hill, "it's a Hell of a long ways if he's going to the mountains!"

"I don't know where he's goin', but he's goin' toward 'em, as you can see. Here's a boy that can tell you where he's goin'," said Morris, as Jerry came around the corner of the building and watched Howell ride away. "Say, Jerry, where's Howell goin'?"

"Howell?" asked Jerry surprisedly, and he turned and looked at the rider speeding away.

"Yes, Howell. Can't you see?" the stableman asked, pointing toward the man growing dim in the distance.

"Looks like he's going out to the ranch," answered Jerry. He had seen Marjie leave town, and believing that she had gone directly to her sister's, had felt no further fear for her. When she had disappeared, he entered the stable and applied for a situation. The stableman, being short of help, and knowing and liking Jerry, had readily given him a place in the barn. Jerry had now begun his new life. Some day soon he would go back to the Retreat and tell Ike all that had happened, — tell him too, that he was now doing what he had so desired him to do, — taking his place in the world. And the world now did not seem to be such a terrible place.

"Where 'bouts is his ranch?" inquired the sheriff.

"About forty miles, straight in that direction," replied Jerry, adding more minute directions.

"How'd you come to know that country?" questioned the inspector. "Live there?"

"No," answered the boy, "I don't live there now, but I used to. I'm workin' in the stable now." He did not see fit to enter into further explanations, and the men asked no more questions.

It was the first time that Jerry had ever been in such startling proximity to his aggressive enemy, the officer of the law, but having donned his coat of respectability, he felt secure.

"Get us three horses," instructed the sheriff. "We've got another man and we'll be back in about ten minutes."

"Now, what in Sam Hill's up?" muttered the stableman, as the men disappeared around the corner. "First Howell goes after his wife, and now *they* go after Howell! I can understand why Howell goes after his wife, but I'm blamed if I know why they're goin' after Howell!"

"Because they're such darn fools that they don't know he's goin' for his—, for *her*. They think he's excited over the arrests, an' they think they'll find out something if they follow him. They ain't very smart," said Jerry knowingly,

as he went about his work. In his mind he concluded that Howell would go direct to Tom's place, where he would find Marjie. But she, backed by the presence of her relatives, would refuse to have anything to do with him, in all probability would not even see him.

In this he was partially right, insomuch as Howell did go direct to his brother's ranch as fast as his lamed horse would carry him. He felt certain that he would find her there, for in the last saloon that he had entered in his search for Jerry, an acquaintance drew him to one side and informed him that he had seen her leave town. It was then that he rushed in great haste to the livery stable. The horse that he rode was a sorry looking creature by the time it had traveled the eighteen miles to Tom Howell's place. But it gave the man much time for contemplation.

Tom was at the corral when he rode slowly up.

"Why, hello, George," he exclaimed, "where's Marjie?"

Howell collected his wits in time. Then Marjie was not there! Good God, where was she? His brain worked rapidly. He made no reply until he dismounted.

"Had to hurry back on business," he exclaimed. "How's Kitty feeling?"

"Oh, fairly well, but she'll be disappointed because Marjie was left in town. Why didn't you bring her?"

"Too much of a hurry," answered Howell. "I've got to go right on. Got a good horse that'll go over the road quick? This one's gone lame."

"Yes," said Tom. "But I'm sorry you didn't bring Marjie. Kitty'll have another spell. Here's one of Marjie's horses right here. It's the best traveler on the place."

"All right, I'll take it. I'm in a rush. Some business out there to look after. Never mind, I'll saddle it myself." Howell was off in a hurry. No suspicion entered honest Tom Howell's mind. But more than a suspicion entered the mind of the man riding swiftly toward

the mountains. He would not find her at his ranch. She had gone to the man she loved.

He cursed his luck, and Jerry, and everything else many times over. Truly Jerry was at the bottom of it! But he would force Marjie to return to him, if he had to kill His Highness before her eyes.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

WHERE THEY FIRST FOUND EACH OTHER.

"IT is growing dark," said Marjie. "Let us walk down to the little stream and there on the embankment we will watch the moon rise over the big mountain as we did that night last summer,—when you and I first found each other. Then, when we are far away in some strange land we can think it again, and see it, though we may never behold it with mortal eyes."

And His Highness, blissfully obedient, led the way until again they stood upon the embankment with the tiny stream foaming at their feet. Almost dazed by the ecstasy of their reunion and the sense of freedom that filled the place, they stood in silent rapture.

"Don't you know, little girl, that I

cannot accustom myself to so much happiness," Ike said at last in a voice that was full and low. "It seems like a dream that must vanish. I ask myself how you, dear one, can ever share an outlaw's life and troubles and privations. At times I am mad enough to think that you will be happy. But I know better,— I know better! Yet God knows I am happy!"

"And I, too. I am happy, supremely happy, just in the knowledge that you love me,— that your love always has been mine — and will be always. I would be happy now even though fate separated us, knowing always that you *love* me. That is my whole life!" Her words thrilled him beyond the power of expression. He kissed her hands again and again, and then her face.

"You are sacrificing yourself. I cannot blind myself to that. May God make me worthy of you! I swear before Him, here where we stood so long ago, that I will love you and cherish you and be true to you so long as life endures in body or in soul!—Margaret, my love, if

there was any other way I would not accept this sacrifice.— If I could take you to my mother,— though, God knows, she may be dead; if I could take you to her,— if I could give you what was once mine to give,— an honorable name and every luxury that is yours by right,— I would ask nothing more."

"But even so," she said gently, "if things *were* as you wish, you could not take me to your mother or into your world. — You could only take me as you have now, — into your heart. Why did I do it, Ike? I cannot call you by that name — so new to me, — Gilbert. — What made me marry him?"

The man trembled and turned pale. "I never thought of that in my happiness. I had forgotten it. Oh, the sacrifice is too great, my Margaret!"

"Hush," she implored, placing her hand upon his mouth. "I do not know what that word means."

A short time later a splashing in the water near them warned them that someone had entered the Retreat. A man

rode so near that the bright moon revealed the form and face of Howell.

Terror seized Marjie, making her dumb. She threw her arms about the man beside her and clung to him piteously.

"Put down that gun, Howell," commanded Ike. "Would you shoot her? You don't need to be afraid. You are perfectly safe. I wouldn't harm a hair of your head, though you deserve to be hanged!"

"I'm not going to shoot unless you refuse to hand her over to me. I've come for her." The silence was awful for an instant, then he continued: "Do you hear, Marjie? I've come for you! I guess the law gives a man the right to his wife! Come along and nothing more will be said about it."

She raised her head slowly from His Highness's breast, yet still clinging to him, and looked up at Howell. Then her voice came to her: —

"There is no law on earth that will compel me to go with you or to live

"A man seized Howell from behind."

with you! Before God I am not your wife! I have never been your wife! Do you think a few words uttered by a pious man made me your wife? No! I am still Margaret Navarre, and I belong to *him*. You have done your worst; you may as well leave me. I tell you I would kill myself before I would live with you! You see, I have this matter in my own hands! You are powerless!"

"Well, you can both die together!" exclaimed Howell, lifting his gun. Before it reached his shoulder it was knocked violently from his hand and fell at Marjie's feet. A man seized Howell from behind, pulling him violently from his horse, and a pair of handcuffs were slipped upon his wrists.

"Now, I guess we can talk," said the sheriff blandly. "Hill, just keep that other fellow covered."

"But I don't like to point my gun at a lady," answered the inspector politely, though doing as he was bid.

"What does this outrage mean?" roared Howell.

"We've got you, that's all," answered the sheriff. "We've had you spotted for some time, so you'd better come along quietly and not make any fuss. We'll have plenty of time to talk it over between here and town. We don't want this other gentleman, here, but we're keeping him covered to protect ourselves. The lady'll look out for him when we get you out of here."

"You're making a big mistake," exclaimed Howell. "Yonder is the man you want and not me. I came here to get my wife away from him!"

"You coward!" cried Ike, speaking for the first time. "You might have spared *her!*" The silence was intense after his rich, impressive voice rang out. Then the sheriff spoke: —

"Damn you, Howell, you are a coward! And I ain't agoing to *spare you* now! If that girl was a daughter of mine, I'd kill you like a dog, you — low-lived scoundrel! If she talks true, she never consented to marry you of her own free will!"

"That part is true enough," said His Highness quietly. "But have you any substantial proofs to back you in arresting him? I think not. You may find yourself in an awkward position if you do arrest him without positive evidence against him. His money will save the day, and you, gentlemen, will find yourselves out of a position. Think it over. — Now *I* haven't any money to fight with, and you might win some rewards of honor by capturing me. I am an outlaw of ten years' standing, wanted for murder. I give myself up to you, gentlemen."

"No, no!" screamed Marjie, clasping him desperately. And dire silence reigned for a time, broken only by the girl's dry sobbing. The sheriff and his men moved noiselessly a few steps away and consulted together.

"Don't, Margaret," softly implored Ike. "I cannot bear it. Be brave, or I will be coward enough to shoot these men down like dogs and carry you away in my arms! Do not grieve! It is

better so. There *is* no other way. Remember how I love you. If I loved you less, I could not do this. I will love you so until the end, — *always*, God willing. My Margaret, be brave as only you can be!" In that way he talked to her as a dying man might talk.

Finally she grew strangely quiet. He loved her, and he asked her to be brave. It was a little thing to do when he was going to his death to save her from the wretchedness of a disgraceful existence.

"Be brave and believe always in my love," he whispered. "My love, that even death cannot kill!" The calmness of his own certain death came over her. Suddenly she looked up at him and smiled, — a mere shadow of a smile. She looked at him so for a moment, then spoke softly: "May I not come to see you before? — They will allow me to do so."

"No, no! You must not, — not *there!* You must not come within the shadow of *that.* We will part here, where we first found out what it meant to live.

Promise me that you will not come there. This must be our good-by, little girl."

"You know best. — I will not come." — The words were scarcely audible. The men approached them.

"Let's see, what's your name?" asked the sheriff of Ike.

"I am known here as his His Highness, or Ike. My name is Gilbert Armour. I am wanted for the murder of my step-father, Morton Wilson!"

"But he is innocent!" cried Marjie, breaking away from him and clasping the sheriff's arm frantically. "I know! You must believe me! He is perfectly innocent! Fight for him if it is within your power! See that he gets a proper trial! I cannot let him die, knowing him to be innocent, and you must not. You must believe what I say! You have daughters of your own, and you are kind. Give him a fair chance if it is within your power or your influence. Then I will bless you forever!"

"I'll do my best for him, Miss Navarre,

— or Mrs. ———, no, I'll be danged if I'll call her by *your* name, Howell. You disgrace her! I heard that you'd scared her into marrying you this morning, and that she wasn't any too willing. Oh, you can't keep such things down! People have got eyes in their heads. I was going to look her up to see if it was true, because she's Philip Navarre's little girl." Then, turning to her, he continued: "I used to know your father years ago, down in a little town in California. I know your sister, and I saw you once in town with her sometime last year. You're just like your father. I'd know you anywhere. He used to call you his baby Margaret. I heard tell how you went to live at the old place with his sister after he died. Many's the time I've had with him there! Well, well, poor Philip Navarre! — And you can bet I ain't going back on his little girl! I'll be danged if I do!" A moment's silence, then the old sheriff said kindly to Ike, "I don't recollect much about your case, though it seems familiar, — at

least the name does. But I reckon I've got to take you on your own word, though it's a little out of the ordinary method. We've come to the conclusion that we'd better let Howell go for this time, — but the law's got its eye on him, and he'd better look out."

"You'd better take those handcuffs off, then," exclaimed Howell.

"Not till you give your word that you'll leave this girl alone!" said the sheriff.

"That's our private affair," returned Howell.

"That may be," said His Highness quietly, going up to him, "but I want you to promise, — no, not to promise, but to *swear* that you will leave her forever in peace. — I insist. Kindly grant me my request." His voice sounded queer, as though beneath its calmness was boiling a terrible undercurrent of warning. "*Swear!*" insisted Ike.

"Well, all right, then, damn you!" He took the oath before them all. Then Ike spoke again: —

"I have to ask a favor of you, too, sheriff. Will you kindly see that this lady gets safely under the protection of her sister? I give you my word that I will go quietly with your men."

"With all my heart," responded the kind-hearted sheriff.

"Now, Howell, you're loose," he said as he removed the handcuffs. "Miss Navarre and myself will accompany you as far as the first ranch down here. I reckon we can get accommodations for the night." Then turning to Ike,— "You are a gentleman, sir! The boys can stay here with you to-night, and to-morrow, early, push on into town."

"I will get your horse," said Ike to the white-faced girl beside him. He left them quietly. They waited several minutes in absolute silence, then he returned bringing the horse.

"I've got her own horse," said Howell huskily. "Here, we'll just change saddles." But Marjie never moved. What mattered it to her what horse she rode? What mattered anything in the agony

of this parting? Ike came close to her. She did not look up, but she felt his presence.

"Well, we'd better move on," said the sheriff, when Howell had changed the saddles, but Marjie did not move. She could hear the splashing of the water as Howell rode out of the Retreat, and she could feel that Ike stood near her. Then he came closer. The sheriff turned his back and the other men walked away.

For one moment he held her close, then went blindly away through the darkness, while the sheriff lifted her upon the horse.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

ANYWAY, IT'S BAD LUCK TO PUT OFF A WEDDING.

MARJIE went home to Kitty. For a week she was ill, very ill, but brave withal, so that with the warmth of early spring came the truant vitality back to its own. But no word of Ike reached her. She could not bring herself to inquire about him, for she had not the strength to hear what she feared had come to pass. She had an idea that the arm of justice, or in his case injustice, acted quickly. And in this belief she put off from day to day her inquiries, waiting until she should be stronger to bear the worst. If he could by a miracle have been released, — she argued to herself, — surely the sheriff would have

come to her, or Ike, himself. Sometimes it seemed to her that she had dreamed it all. Then she longed with all the intensity of her nature for some written word from His Highness to reassure her. It seemed strange to her that he had not sent a farewell message, yet she never found the heart to make inquiries. Sometime, when she could bear it better, she would learn the details of his trial and possible death, — but not now. It seemed to her too terrible to even think about.

One morning two weeks later, a top buggy approached the house, and Jerry, resplendent and smiling in new, well-fitting clothes, came quickly up to the porch where Marjie was sitting. She rose from her chair and stretched out both hands to him.

"Jerry! I am so glad to see you! Why, what a man you have grown to be! And how fine you are! But — still you are the same Jerry. How glad I am you came! Sit down out here in the shade, and we will talk before the others

find you. Why, you are a man, Jerry! I cannot realize it! But I suppose it is the clothes." He seated himself in a chair beside her.

"Yes," he said, "I suppose I must be a man, for I'm more than twenty-one. An' I hope I'm a man, because I'm thinkin' of getting married."

"Not married, Jerry!" exclaimed Marjie. "What will Taggie say?"

"I guess she won't care. She's been kind of lookin' for it for a while back. I wanted you to know about it, because I wanted you to come in to the wedding. You'll come, won't you?"

"Why, yes; I think there is no reason why I should not do so." Then suddenly, — "I owe you so much, Jerry. — But do you know, I am jealous, for Taggie's sake? I thought you two cared for each other. But if it is within my power I will go."

"Taggie'll be mighty disappointed if you don't," declared Jerry.

"Taggie! Oh, Jerry, I'm so glad! Of course it's Taggie! But the idea of

you two getting married! Why you are only children!" she exclaimed.

"But Taggie's most as old as you,—an' we thought that as long as we were going to get married, that it might as well be now."

"But I can't realize it," Marjie went on. "What put such an idea into your head?"

"I don't know," answered the boy. "Those kind of things just happen, I reckon. Then, since Ike's gone — I feel like I ain't got no home at all, no matter where I go. Taggie's willin', so I am going up there to see what the old man says about it. I expect I'll have to run away with her."

Marjie had turned pale at the mention of the name she loved so well. She leaned back in her chair quietly for awhile, then spoke: —

"Don't do it without her father's consent, Jerry. It wouldn't be right."

"But if he won't give it?" inquired the boy.

"Oh,—well then,—but ask him, Jerry.

What are you going to do, and where are you going to live?" she asked.

"We thought we'd go up an' live in the Retreat. Ike,— before he left,"— he said nervously, not knowing whether he should speak to her of him or not, "gave me some money an' told me to start a bunch of cattle up there. I told him all about Taggie an' everything, an' he said that he was glad, that he felt better about leaving."

She leaned toward him and asked softly: —

"Tell me, did he,— was he contented —happy to — go?"

"He seemed to be," answered Jerry. She would have questioned him farther, being at that moment brave enough to endure the shock of it all, but Tom Howell interrupted them. After a few minutes Marjie withdrew, and Jerry drove away toward the mountains without seeing her again.

Early the next day the boy drove back. This time he helped from the buggy a blushing, sweet-faced girl, who

ran up the path and threw her arms about Marjie. Then she alternately laughed and cried until Marjie drew her into the house and asked her to give an account of herself. This she did with many pauses and exclamations.

"An' I'm scared to death!" she concluded. "If you don't go to town with me I'll never have the nerve, — never!"

"I will go," said Marjie soothingly. "I certainly wouldn't like to have you go alone, dear. Such a little thing as you. Of course I will go. You must rest here to-day and we will go to town in the morning."

"But we've *got* to go to-day," demurred Taggie nervously. "We must go to-day.— Anyway, it's bad luck to put off a wedding."

"Oh, if you put it that way, you superstitious child, of course I've nothing further to say. But are you all ready? Isn't it rather sudden?"

"I didn't have much to get ready," she answered, then throwing herself face

downward on Marjie's bed, began to cry as though her heart would break.

Marjie soothed her with gentle, tender words, until the girl ceased crying and exclaimed : —

" You make me feel ashamed of myself! I ain't got any great trouble like you, either, an' nothing much to cry about. — Only, I guess I've got to tell you. You see I had to run away! We're eloping, Jerry and I ; for when Jerry asked my father about it, he just pointed to the door, an' Jerry had to go. He just wouldn't listen at all. When I went after the cows, Jerry was there, and told me I had to come, anyway, so I told him to meet me at the road early in the morning before daylight. My mother helped me to get ready, and she had to do it when Pa wasn't looking. She helped me to sneak out about three o'clock this morning, an' I got in the buggy and drove away with Jerry. I only brought a bundle along with me. Ma got it ready last night, an' put it outside the house where I could find it.

But Pa'll be all right when we get back."

Marjie kissed the girl tenderly, and for a moment did not speak. At last she said: —

"Well, you must make the best of it. At any rate you have your mother's consent, and it happens that you are just of age. But what a child, — eighteen! I am twenty. — Not so old to have already lived a lifetime. — But you are such a baby, Taggie! But come, let's see what we can do to enlarge your trousseau."

Trunks and boxes were overhauled, and many useful and dainty garments were forced into the young girl's possession. "You've got no right to object, Taggie," insisted Marjie. "I have more than I need, and these things are of no earthly use to me. You are a tiny mite beside me, but most of these things will fit, and these shirt waists are sort of adjustable. The short skirts will do nicely, and the long ones can be remedied when we get around to it."

"What part am I to play in the fairy

god-mother act?" laughed Kitty, coming in upon them.

"You can furnish the wedding gown," was Marjie's quick reply. "You are just the same size."

Kitty thought for a moment, then hurried out of the room. She returned soon with a dainty white organdy dress which she placed in Taggie's hands, saying to the astonished girl: —

"One happy girl was married in this, why not another? I've been wanting to get rid of it, for it isn't considered good luck to keep one's wedding dress. Try it on, I am sure it will fit you. Then I can have the pleasure of seeing how lovely you will look when you are married, for I cannot go to town with you."

It is true that dress makes a difference in a person's looks. It was astonishing how it transformed sweet little Taggie. She was surprisingly lovely. But then she was a bride, — and a runaway one at that.

That evening in the quiet hotel parlor, Jerry and Taggie were married, and

over in the Bucket of Blood the gang drank to the health of the couple, "too good to stay long in these parts"; at which the proprietor retaliated with: "Too good to have anything to do with such as you."

CHAPTER XL.

"I SAY YOU SHALL WAKE UP!"

"I WANT to see Mrs. Howell," said a woman's coarse, masculine voice. "An' I want to see her quick! No matter if she is in bed, I want to see her! Mrs. Margaret Navarre Howell, if you please! What's the number of her room?"

The woman's loud voice in the hall, reached Marjie as she lay in bed thinking of the sweet wedding of the evening, and the happiness that the future held for these two; — thinking what the great love of a noble man meant to her, and of the dreariness of the future apart from him.

The woman's voice brought her out of bed in an instant. It was a voice from the past. She recognized it at

once, and held her breath. Then with an impulse born of the moment, she opened the door slightly and half spoke, half whispered, — "Lil!"

The woman heard her, and leaving the astonished chambermaid standing in the hall, made her way to Marjie's door and entered the darkened room.

"I'm mighty glad you heard me!" she exclaimed, attempting to lower her voice. "That idiot out there wouldn't 'a' given me the number if I'd stood there all night!"

"Wait," said Marjie, "until I dress. I was in bed. I will light the lamp in a moment."

"I can't stay but a minute," said the woman. "I tried to see you before to-night, but they wouldn't let me. I can't leave George very long. You see, he got in a little trouble over in the Bucket o' Blood last night, an' there was a lot of shootin' goin' on. George, he got hit, and Tim come a runnin' over to tell me about it. I had him brought over to my place. He's mighty bad off, an'

keeps a callin' for you all the time, so I thought I'd come over an' get you. It's lucky you come in town just as you did. Tim an' me ain't been here but a week. Got tired of Sandy. Too small a town to do much business, so we thought we'd try this place for a while."

Marjie was horrified. Finally when the woman gave her an opportunity to speak, she asked: "Is he in any danger?"

"The doctor says he can't live till morning, — that he ain't got no show on earth. You'll come with me, won't you?" Marjie did not hesitate.

"Certainly," she answered, "I will go, but what can I do for him?"

The woman began to cry. "He's callin' for you all the time. He just worships you! Anyway, he'll be quieter when you're there. You can pray for him. — I don't know how. I guess he'd die easier if you was there a praying for him an' forgivin' him. — He ain't such a bad one, though, — but he just lost his head over you, and his senses, too. Kid

was tellin' me about him. Kid, he was sent up, but he broke jail and skipped the country."

"Why isn't Tom with him?" asked Marjie who was dressing with trembling hands.

"I sent Tim after him this afternoon, as soon as the doctor said he couldn't pull through. He'll be here to-night, I reckon."

"I'm glad," said Marjie. In another moment she was ready, and followed the woman out of the hotel down the dimly lit streets into the back door of a saloon.

There upon a bed in a small room lay George Howell, raving in the delirium of his last suffering. The doctor sat beside him. When they entered he looked with surprise at the beautiful, white-faced girl, and with a sudden involuntary movement, stood up and offered her his chair. She sank into it, and with frightened eyes watched the dying man as he clawed weakly at the bed clothing, moving his hands helplessly as if in search of something. Suddenly he attempted to sit up,

but in great agony fell back muttering: —

"I swore I'd keep away from her but I'll never deliver any of your damned letters! — Marjie — Margaret! — No, you kept her from me! I might have won her if it hadn't been for you! — She'll never get your letter! — Why don't she come to me? — Marjie! — You're cheating, damn you! Where did you get that card? Don't shoot!" —

At first his delirium only frightened Marjie. Instinctively she moved away. Then the words that he had muttered began to repeat themselves in her brain,— soon with a meaning. Frantically she approached the sick man, now muttering incoherently and less wildly. She dropped upon her knees beside him, grasping his restless hands with almost supernatural strength.

"My letter! — He wrote! What have you done with it? Tell me! Answer me! If you have kept it away from me,— if you still have it,— then I implore you to give it to me! Where is it? —

Make him tell me!" she cried, turning to the approaching physician. "*Make* him speak to me! Don't let him die without telling me! If you can bring him back to consciousness just for one minute.— It cannot be impossible!"

"He can't last till morning," answered the doctor. "Bullet passed through this side and located in lung. Hear his breathing? I'm afraid he's past consciousness. He'll keep getting weaker and will finally sleep quietly away."

"But he must waken!— He must!" Then, frantically, to the dying man:— "You must wake up and speak to me! It's Marjie, do you hear?— I say you *shall* wake up!" She took him firmly by the shoulders and shook him with all her strength. The man groaned in pain, opened his eyes and looked at her.

"Marjie!" he said huskily. "You have come to me! I'm done for, I guess, and God knows I deserve it. But I'm glad to die!— I loved you so,— and wanted you.— It's the only excuse I can find for all my meanness. I must have

been crazy, little girl, to cause you such misery. You were good to come. I wanted — to give you a letter. It came in my mail, shortly after His Highness went away. I was mad, — crazy. I wouldn't give you that much happiness. I kept it. It's there in my clothes.— My vest,— Marjie, say you — forgive —."

"Oh, a thousand times! Yes, I forgive you! I've never held it against you."

Suddenly, almost with the man's last conscious breath, she bent and kissed him tenderly.

CHAPTER XLI.

WHAT THE LETTER TOLD.

NOT until Marjie returned to the ranch did she open her letter,— the message from her dead.

This night alone in her room she took it from her bosom and looked at it as she had done many times before. It had not been opened, but its edges were worn and cut, and a stain of blood obliterated the postmark and address. Coming from the dead man's pocket, it seemed to Marjie that the one who had written it must also be dead. To-night she would read his message. How good God was to grant her this great solace!

She opened it with fingers that trembled violently. A newspaper clipping slipped out and fell to the floor and she stooped to pick it up. As she did so the

headlines of the article caught her eye. The surprise was so great that for a time she read no more. The article ran:

"GILBERT ARMOUR LIVES!"

"His Chicago friends and acquaintances will be glad to learn that Gilbert Armour has at last returned to this city. Many will remember the murder of his step-father, Morton Wilson, which happened while he, with a small party of his friends, were camping in the Rocky Mountains. Many will also remember that Gilbert Armour was, as believed by many, unjustly suspected of the crime, and was arrested on the strength of the suspicion. He escaped before a trial could be given and was never again heard of until he returned to this city yesterday.

"Everyone will remember the suicide and confession of Walter P. Wilson which caused so great a sensation two years ago. In an insane moment he murdered his uncle Morton Wilson, and for years allowed the blame to rest upon young Armour. Finally, consumed with remorse over his dreadful crime, he wrote a full confession, and then took his own life. Since then a wide and thorough search has been made for Gilbert Armour. Where he has been during these years is still a mystery. The many friends of his youth will be glad to

"The surprise was so great that for a time she read no more."

learn of his return. His mother, Mrs. Wilson, still resides in her magnificent home in this city."

When Marjie read the heading and one or two lines of this article, a mist came before her eyes and life itself seemed almost extinguished before the shock of the marvelous truth. Afterward, when her strength returned, she read his letter. It was brief, telling her that he could not yet believe or accustom himself to his own good fortune. In conclusion he wrote:

"Be brave, as you always are, my Marjie. Some day soon I will come for you, and in spite of every obstacle, I will take you to my mother as I hopelessly longed to do that night upon the embankment in our Retreat. I have told her of you and she blesses you. That I may prove worthy of you and the great happiness to come, I fervently pray."

The date showed that the letter was but two weeks old.

Then Marjie lived as she never lived before, inspired by the certainty of her happiness.

Jerry remained in town to finish his month's work with the stableman, and to give Taggie a taste of "city life," which pleased the little bride, for now that the deed had been committed and she was Jerry's wife, she feared somewhat to sue for her father's blessing.

Marjie had gone home to Kitty with Tom. After she read her letter and began to realize to the full extent the happiness that had come to her, she seemed a different being.

Tom had taken immediate charge of the Howell sheep ranch in the mountains. It was now "lambing time," the busiest part of the sheep-man's year. It became necessary for him to give it his undivided attention, so leaving his ranch and cattle in the hands of a competent man, he gathered up his small family, the cook and a few household goods, and moved up into the mountains, declaring that there was no reason why he should be separated from his home life.

Kitty was delighted with the change, and Marjie,— who shall say? When she

first entered the long, flat ranch house, it seemed to her that she must suffocate with the vivid memories that crowded upon her. Every detail of the past seemed as clear as when she lived them in reality. At every turn she made through the house, she could fancy that she saw the huge figure of the woman, Lil, and in the background hovered Howell, the passion in whose eyes seemed to scorch her soul. But the past faded quickly, as it does in youth, leaving only in its track the dim impression of an ugly dream.

That day Marjie found in the pasture Jerry's gray Lady. She had not seen the small pony since she left the ranch so abruptly the summer before. Lady caught sight of the girl first, and came racing across the field to meet her, bringing Marjie back to herself again,— to a full realization of the present, and the glorious hope of an unclouded future. She led the small creature up to the house to be inspected and admired by Kitty and the little ones, who crowded about with many expressions of delight. Then taking her

sister aside, she told her all of the story which she had been unable to tell before, but much of which Kitty had already guessed.

"And it was all Lady's doings," she concluded softly. "I wonder if she knew then,—could know how it would all come out."

"Perhaps not Lady," said her sister, "but God knew.—There was a discord somewhere in the harmony of truth, and it had to be,—all the misery and tragedy and suffering. So long as evil exists, such things must happen. That is the natural sequence of broken laws."

CHAPTER XLII.

WHERE THEY FOUND EACH OTHER.

MARJIE was planning a surprise for Jerry and his little bride. With Kitty's assistance she had transformed the cabin in the Retreat into a neat, cozy home which would seem a veritable palace to the young people. She had done something else during the week after she came to the mountains. She had spent an hour in conversation with old man Winter, the result of which was that he was willing and anxious to receive his wayward daughter into his open and forgiving arms.

The young people were expected home in a few days. The alterations in the cabin had been completed, and late one warm spring day, Marjie rode up there to assure herself that everything

was in readiness and nothing forgotten that would add to their happiness. She had not been gone from the ranch a half hour before a dark, distinguished looking man rode up to the house and inquired for her. Kitty left the sleepy babies, and with quick beating heart and extended hands, went out to meet him. She felt, before he had given his name, who he was, and the light in her face gave him greeting. She told him where Marjie had gone.

"You are her sister," he said simply. "My heart has told me that."

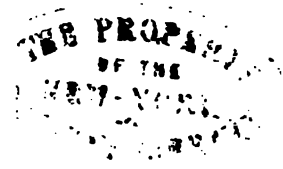
A half hour later he found Marjie standing beside Lady at the entrance of the Retreat, looking down into the sparkling stream. She heard the splashing of water and turned quickly toward him, going a few steps to meet him, then stopped, weak from the surprise and happiness that fairly deluged her heart. Though powerless to move, her face was raised to him with a look of the sweetest greeting that ever man received. There upon the embankment, with the soft

moon just stealing above the mountains, and the creek flowing noisily at their feet, they found each other forever.

"Listen," said Marjie softly, when the moon had climbed still higher. "Did you ever know that water could make such sweet music?"

Lady watched them for a while, then whinnying softly, came up and rubbed her head against them. Together they made their way down the moonlit gulch, to the ranch below, and to Kitty.

THE END.



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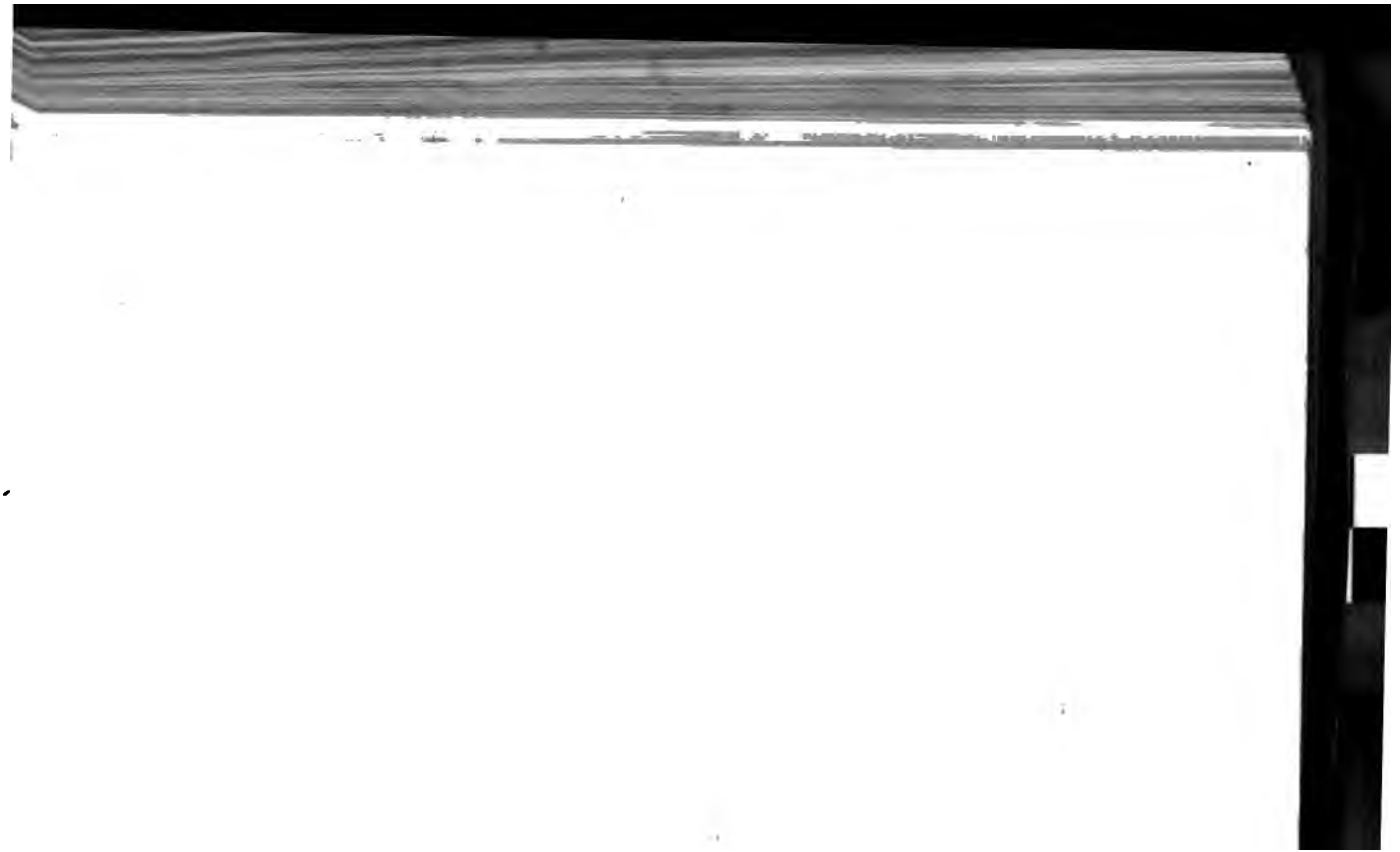

Miss Petticoats

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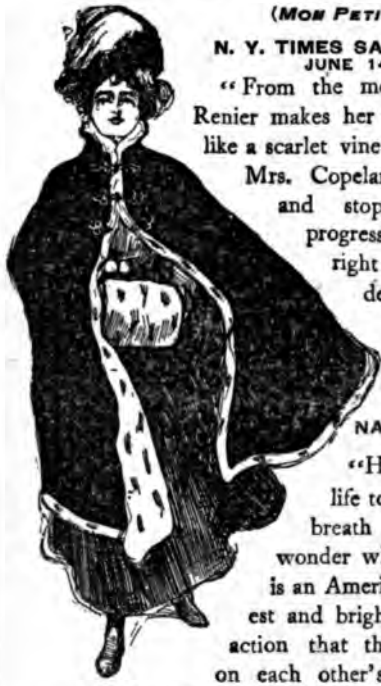

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